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AT HER MERCY.

A Novel.

BY THE AUTHOR OF

"LOST SIR MASSINGBERD,"

ETC., ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. II.

LONDON:

RICHARD BENTLEY AND SON.

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AT HER MERCY.

CHAPTER I.

IN WHICH MRS. HULET "COMES OUT" UNEXPECTEDLY.

UPON precisely "the day six months" after that on which the two lovers had parted from one another in Dirleton Park did the faithful Jack present himself at Cliff Cottage. Evy, of course, expected him. She knew from Mrs. General Storks that a new face had recently appeared at the table d'hôte, "and a very good-looking one too, except that he has had his hair not cut, my dear,

but mown, in consequence of an attack of brain fever, from the effects of which he has not recovered."

Evy, who was aware, from his portrait, that the deceased general had been wont to wear his hair flowing over his coat-collar, and to a considerable distance down his back, was prepared for her dear Jack's round head affording the widow some excitement, but the words "of which he has not recovered," alarmed her exceedingly. She had had no communication with the captain, and he might very easily have been taken ill without her knowledge. "Is he an invalid then?" asked she, mustering all the indifference at her command.

"Not in body, my dear, so far as I know," was the widow's rejoinder, "but certainly in mind. No man who is not mad would ride a steeple-chase, I suppose, unless he was paid for it; and that is what the captain has come to Balcombe to do.

'Going to ride his own horse, sir,' was what every man whispered to his neighbour down the long dinner-table at the mansion, and if he had been Shakespeare himself they could scarcely have regarded him with greater reverence. When I asked who the new-comer was of Mr. Paragon, he told me he was a 'gentleman rider,' which seems a very remarkable profession; the same thing, I suppose, as your 'gentleman farmer,' only on horseback?"

"Oh dear no," said Evy, "not at all the same thing;" and at once entered into an explanation and vindication of gentleman-riders with an enthusiasm worthy of the noblest cause. But though Evy had thus been made aware of the captain's presence in Balcombe, and fully expected him at the earliest date on which his pledge to Lord Dirleton permitted him to visit her, his arrival, when it did take place, was nevertheless somewhat of a surprise.

Not because she doubted his impatience to see her, but because the fact of his calling in the morning would have a significance that he might think it well to avoid, she did not look for him till the afternoon; though she had slept but little on the previous night for thinking of him, she had come downstairs calm and collected, and with the resolve not to reveal to anybody —and especially to Judith, who she fancied had been watching her of late with mischievous narrowness—the emotions that were thronging her gentle bosom. At the breakfast-table, over which, under pretence that Evy alone knew how to make his tea, she had been appointed to preside by Mr Hulet—she officiated as usual, listening to the narration of old "symptoms" in aunt or uncle with exemplary patience, or sympathizing with the new disorders with which one or other of them was for ever being threatened. After the morning meal

her arm was offered to Aunt Sophia for the customary stroll on the cliff walk, an honour to which Evy had shown herself very averse, not on account of its inconvenience, but because she felt that she was taking Judith's proper place in accepting it; but it had been thrust upon her. Mrs. Hulet manifested a marked preference for her society over that of her late companion on all occasions—in which alone her husband was wont to observe his wife showed sense—and for Evy to protest against the expression of it only made matters worse.

"I beg you will not have any delicacy on my account," Judith had plainly told her, "for it will not make your aunt's behaviour to myself one whit less odious; it is quite clear that I have lost her favour, and that you have won it; wear it and welcome, my dear Evy; push her footstool, hand her salts, and listen to the wisdom of her Doctor Carambole; I have had enough

of it all, I assure you, and resign my post to you without a pang of regret."

Without regret, perhaps, yet not altogether as Evy fancied without some wound to her self-love. At all events, Judith's behaviour towards her had certainly lost the cordiality it once possessed, for which she pitied but did not blame her. And so it happened that on the eventful morning of which we speak, Evy and her aunt were promenading slowly up and down the cliff walk together, the latter silent and shivering in her shawls, though April at Balcombe has almost the warmth of June elsewhere in England, and the former silent also, but very thoughtful.

Dear Jack was coming, that was certain, and with faithful purpose; but were the circumstances such as to allow of her permitting him to put that purpose into execution? Did it involve the sacrifice of his prospects and of his favour with his uncle?

that was the question; above all, if it was so, would she have the courage to refuse him? It would be very, very hard to do so. For six long months she had not asked, she had not heard, the least tidings of him. With the exception of that conversation with Mr. De Coucy, at the picnic, and of her unwilling confidence to Judith, she had not spoken of him to any one, and yet she had him as vividly before her eyes as on the eve of the day of their separation, still heard his loving words, still felt the kiss he had given her at parting on her faithful cheek.

That her uncle would be less willing to lose her than ever, she well knew; but also that his love for her was far too genuine to permit him to oppose her happiness. *That* rested, she felt convinced, with herself alone. Nothing would be easier—and certainly nothing more delightful—than to meet Captain Heyton, as in the hour in

which he had bidden her adieu, as his plighted bride. But would not such behaviour be a proof that her love for him was not so genuine and unselfish as that of her uncle for herself? To this, indeed, her heart could not assent, for was it not throbbing at that instant with as genuine and unselfish love as ever beat in human breast? But from her heart she endeavoured to appeal to her conscience—her sense of duty. It would not be right to permit her lover to lose his fortune for her sake, and therefore, unless she knew that that sacrifice would not be demanded—unless he told her so with his first words—she would receive him, not coldly indeed, for that would be impossible, but with maidenly reserve and dignity. It would not be difficult, she thought, in the very expression of his face, to read how his suit with the old lord had sped; whether she was free to love him or not. If he wore a

quiet resolute smile—the smile of one who is set upon a purpose though the loss is great—she also would be resolute to oppose it. While on the other hand, if his looks showed——

"Evy!"

She stopped as suddenly as though like Daphne she had been rooted to the ground, causing her nervous companion to utter a shrill scream, under the impression perhaps that one or both of them had fallen over the cliff; but Evy did not hear it, she only heard her name, and recognized the voice that uttered it.

"Evy!"

For one instant she saw him standing in the little drawing-room at the French window that opened on the croquet ground like some glorious picture in a frame, and the next he was across the lawn, clearing the flower-bed at a bound, and had clasped her in his arms. There was no time (how

foolish to have supposed there would have been) to learn from the expression of his features whether he was fated to have fifty thousand a year, or only five hundred; but if happy looks are the index of a moneyed man, Jack Heyton must have been a millionaire at least. Not till she had returned his embrace with corresponding warmth did the recollection of her good resolutions occur to poor Evy, accompanied by the reflection that it had occurred too late.

"Dear me, dear me," gasped Mrs. Hulet. "How you have made my heart go, young man. Evy, where's my salts?"

"A thousand pardons, madam," replied Jack, taking the little bottle of restoratives from Evy's fingers, and applying it with his own hand to the good lady's needs. "But your niece has made *my* heart go, and has it in her own possession, which must needs excuse the impetuosity of my

conduct. My aunt, the late Lady Dirleton, used to be affected like yourself with palpitations, and I was always sent for—just like the doctor—because I was so conversant with her favourite remedies."

"Dear me, how nice of you!" ejaculated Mrs. Hulet, with the bluntness that habitual ill-health engenders. "How I wish that early in life I had met with some young man like you."

The idea that so eminent a person as Captain Hulet's aunt should have suffered from the same complaint as herself was doubtless grateful to the old lady's sense of dignity, but his attention to her physical exigencies—he was at that very moment fanning her with his wide-awake with all the delicate dexterity of a Japanese performing the butterfly trick—fairly carried her heart by storm. A man of the world would have taken it for granted that the captain had not got his uncle's consent,

and felt the necessity for ingratiating himself in other quarters; but in the latter respect, at least, he would have been wrong. Jack was eminently "good-natured," and without being at all a fine gentleman, was always ready to help a lady, a term which he understood to apply to any one of the fair sex, whatever her social position.

Mrs. Hulet's naïve remark made both the young folks laugh heartily, and helped to put blushing Evy at ease.

"So you did not expect me so soon," said the captain gaily, when the old lady had been brought round.

"I thought you might not have come perhaps till the afternoon," answered Evy.

"There, you hear that," exclaimed Mrs. Hulet, smiling. "My niece expected you to leave your card, with kind inquiries after her aunt and uncle, and then to ride away again, or, at least, she endeavours to persuade me so. I see how matters stand.

An old woman like me is sadly in the way on these occasions; if you'll give me your arm to the house, Captain Heyton, you shall come back and have a walk with this young lady alone, for your reward."

Never, within Evy's knowledge of her, had her aunt evinced such liveliness and excitement, as she did on this occasion. "I like to make young people happy," continued she, as if in apology for her unwonted behaviour, "and though I have not been very fortunate in the drawing myself, I still entertain the greatest interest in the marriage lottery. Captain Heyton," added she, more gravely, as they slowly drew out of ear-shot of her niece, "you have gained a prize in Evy, such as falls to the lot of few men."

"I am sure of that," answered he, frankly; "I am also aware that I do not deserve it."

"I don't know about that," returned the

old lady, kindly; "you seem to me to have a good heart. Though, indeed" (here she sighed deeply), "that is not enough to insure wedded happiness. You must be patient with her as well as kind, my young friend. 'Bear and Forbear' should be the motto on every wedding-ring. Forgive me for speaking so plainly, and with such abruptness; my love for your Evy must be my excuse. To-morrow, or even sooner, you will find out that I am nobody in this house, and my good advice will seem to you of no value. Good-morning, sir."

As she spoke of her own troubles her manner, which had been singularly warm and earnest, grew frigid, and her last words fell like three little blocks of ice. Jack raised her withered white hand to his lips, and kissed the finger tips.

"Though others may consider you 'nobody,' madam," returned he with feeling, "there is one person, at least, whose esteem

you have won to-day, and which you will keep to his life's end."

"Thanks—hush! That is Mr. Hulet's voice. It is sad to have to say it, but if you would gain his favour I counsel you to show none to me."

The next moment Mr. Hulet appeared at the porched door, which opened on the garden, and as if in corroboration of his wife's words, his brow darkened at sight of the stranger upon whose arm his wife was leaning.

"Who is this young gentleman?" inquired he; "if at least you think it worth while to introduce your visitors to the personage who is humorously entitled the master of the house."

"Speak to him fairly, and don't cross him," whispered Mrs. Hulet, in an earnest whisper, at the same moment withdrawing her arm, and walking unassisted (as, indeed, she was perfectly competent to do) within doors.

"My name is Heyton, sir, Captain Heyton. We have met before, more than once, Mr. Hulet."

"Indeed, then, I had forgotten it," returned the other coldly. "I remember you now, and conjecture the cause of your present visit. Don't you think it would have been more becoming under the circumstances, Captain Heyton, if instead of making your way yonder"—he pointed to where Evy was standing, the spectatress of a scene which, being out of ear-shot, she understood but imperfectly, though she had her suspicions of its nature—"if, instead of seeking out my niece, or endeavouring to secure Mrs. Hulet's good offices on your behalf, you had come, in the first instance, to me?"

"Indeed, Mr. Hulet, I endeavoured to do so," answered the captain, with a humility that did his self-restraint great credit. "It was for you, and you alone, I asked,

and the servant left me in yonder room, from which, however, seeing the ladies walking in the garden, I thought it no harm to join them."

"It might have been, it may be still, great harm, sir. However, perhaps you will now favour me with a few minutes' private conversation in my study, before rejoining Miss Carthew, if, that is, you succeed in making it clear to me that it is advisable that you should rejoin her."

It is not always the best plan for establishing your position in a house to cultivate the good graces of the junior partner.

CHAPTER II.

UNCLE ANGELO MELTS.

MR. HULET'S "study" at Cliff Cottage was much the same sort of room as it had been at Dunwich, and as most "studies" are which appertain to men who seldom read anything but the newspaper. It had a somewhat bare and disused air about it; the tenants of the bookcase were few and huddled together without order on a couple of shelves, just as they had been taken out of their packing-cases; and in a corner of the room stood, without any pretence of concealment, the proprietor's boots, which,

though the morning was far advanced, had not yet superseded his slippers. Nor was the absence of literature made up for by the attractions of art. Only one picture graced the walls—the portrait with which we have already made acquaintance, that of Mr. Hulet's revered ancestor, as he appeared when about to cut His Sacred Majesty's head off. Upon the table was a large assemblage of physic-bottles, but not so many as there would have been by reason of their owner's habit of leaving them all over the house.

"Take a seat, Captain Heyton," said Mr. Hulet, frigidly; the captain obeyed, and being naturally under considerable nervous excitement, began to play with a graduated medicine glass; "and if you will take my advice," continued the host, "you will not put that glass to your lips unless you are in the habit of taking prussic acid in considerable doses."

"Dear me, that is rather dangerous, is it not—I mean the leaving it about like that?" said Jack.

"It is nothing of the sort, unless where there are idiots in a house," answered the invalid, sharply.

The poor captain could hardly have made a more unfortunate observation save one, and that in his great embarrassment he did make.

"I should have thought it was bad for children."

"And what if it be, sir? There are not any children here, I believe, nor likely to be any."

Jack held his tongue; this being a point which he felt it did not become him to argue. Mrs. Hulet's whispered injunction was still in his ear, not to cross this man, but to speak him fairly; and since speaking had not proved a success, he resolved to be silent. An excellent determination,

for time for reflection was just what Mr. Hulet required. That gentleman was, in fact, more angry with himself for being out of humour than he was with his visitor. He had recognized Jack immediately, though irritation at seeing him attempting, as he thought, to curry favour with Mrs. Hulet had caused him to pretend otherwise; and albeit he had a natural distaste for the man who was come thither with the intention of robbing him of his heart's treasure, his conscience smote him with the sense of his own injustice. Moreover, if this marriage was to be, how injudicious, he reflected, was it to make an enemy of this young fellow, who would have the power to carry—and keep—Evy away from him.

"Well, Captain Heyton, you have doubtless something to say to me. By your presence here, I am to conclude, am I not, that you are of the same mind with respect

to my niece, Evy Carthew, as you were six months ago?"

"That is so, sir," answered the captain, earnestly, "or rather, I seem to love her ten times as much to-day, as I did then; though then it seemed impossible that I could love her more."

Mr. Hulet smiled approval. This was a young aristocrat, it was true, idle in his habits, extravagant in his tastes, and with everything wrong in all probability about his opinions; but at all events he was not ashamed of what his class would term a weakness—a tender affection for an honest girl.

"That's well, so far," answered the old gentleman, "absence makes the heart grow fonder. I have found that out myself, and only regret I did not give it a longer trial. But, you see, I know nothing about you, Captain Heyton; absolutely nothing, except what Evy has told me—who is not an

entirely unprejudiced informant. When I gave her permission to receive a visit from you at the termination of six months, I honestly confess to you I flattered myself that by that time you would have forgotten all about her."

"That is but a poor compliment to me, sir, and what is of much more consequence," added Jack, with graceful humility, "to Miss Carthew also. I cannot fancy any one who has ever seen her forgetting her in six months; nor in a lifetime!"

Jack spoke out of the fulness of his heart, with heightened colour and earnest tone, but he could not have found a nearer way to his host's favour, had he employed the most elaborate devices to obtain it.

"You are right, young man," said Mr. Hulet. "Evy is one in a thousand, God bless her. But there are some persons,

and especially in a certain rank of society, for whom modesty and goodness have few charms. Forgive me for supposing it might have been so with you. You are the nephew and heir-presumptive of Lord Dirleton, I believe?"

"The nephew, Mr. Hulet, but not the heir-presumptive," answered the young man gravely.

"Umph," chuckled the invalid. "So the old lord has kept his word, has he, and cut you off with a shilling?"

"Indeed, sir, no; my uncle has behaved to me with the utmost kindness and consideration. His prejudices are very decided, as you know——"

"Oh! yes, I know," interrupted Mr. Hulet, with a glance at the portrait of his ancestor. "In particular, he has a great dislike to Regicides, even to the tenth generation."

"That was certainly one of his objec-

tions to my making my addresses to Miss Carthew," continued the captain.

"And you, what do *you* think about it?" inquired Mr. Hulet, with sudden vehemence. "Do you consider that that man yonder"—and he pointed to the picture—"deserved well of his country for ridding it of a false and feeble tyrant, or would you have dug him from his grave, and hung him in chains for having performed his duty?"

"Indeed, sir, I am no politician," returned the captain, in great embarrassment, "but it seems very improper to have dug him up—disturbed the sanctity of the grave!" added Jack, hastily. (The well-known advertisement of a necropolis company most opportunely occurring to his mind). "To war with the dead appears to me a very cowardly proceeding."

"Young man, give me your hand," cried Mr. Hulet, with unwonted excitement.

"Your opinions do you honour, and are altogether superior to your — ahem — to what might be expected; now let me hear about your uncle."

"Well, sir, I have no very good news— not such news as you perhaps may be counting upon——"

"Never mind me," said Mr. Hulet, dryly. "I am nobody. Confine yourself to his Serene Transparency—I mean stick to his lordship."

"Well, sir, he has stuck to me, I must say, so I trust you will not speak ill of him," answered Jack, simply. "He has been a father to me, and a most kind and indulgent one, all my life, just as Evy tells me you have been to her. If her uncle has faults she has never told me of them, and—and I do hope, sir, you will not compel me to listen to anything to the disadvantage of mine."

"I am not aware that I manifested any

intention of abusing him," observed Mr. Hulet, not perhaps without a prick of conscience; his tone and manner had been certainly hostile towards his lordship, the mention of whose name, in fact, had always the same effect upon him as the darts of a matador upon a bull.

"Far be it from me to blame you, young man, for standing up for your relative. He is fortunate in having such a defender, and may well term you (though I once laughed at him for doing so) his Jack."

"Well, sir, all that is over," returned the captain, with a little sigh. "We have not quarrelled, indeed—because it takes two persons to do so—but we two have shaken hands—for ever."

"Don't be too sure—I mean don't distress yourself too much about that," observed Mr. Hulet, grimly. "It is not so easy to effect an eternal separation as some people think."

"You do not know my uncle, sir," answered the captain, unconscious of the other's allusion to his own domestic affairs. "What he has once said he never unsays. He opposed himself to my courtship of your niece from the first upon a ground"—here he hesitated; but following his eyes which had wandered to the ancestral portrait, Mr. Hulet gathered his meaning.

"Objected to the family, I suppose; eh?"

"Well, yes, sir; not to the existing members of it, of course, but to a certain remote progenitor. An objection fanciful and frivolous, indeed——"

"I don't see that," said Mr. Hulet, sharply. "The question is distinct and substantive enough."

"I meant rather that my uncle's views upon such matters are fanciful, sir, or at least overstrained. I pointed out to him that no young lady, however prudent and

sensible, could avoid being descended from her forefathers; and even (though it was dangerous ground to venture upon), that we had had some queer ancestors ourselves. 'Not Regicides, however,' he replied; in a tone that I, who know him so well, interpreted but too corectly. I did not need him to add the words that followed: 'Much as I love you, Jack, I would rather see you dead at my feet than consent to such a marriage.'"

In his regret at his uncle's obstinacy, and still more in his sorrow for the gulf that had opened between them, the captain had somewhat lost sight of the fact that he was addressing one who had not only no sympathy with Lord Dirleton, but a great contempt and hatred of his opinions.

"Upon my life, young man," cried Mr. Hulet, "one would imagine that *I* had nothing to get over in this matter. It is

just possible, sir, that what seems a 'mésalliance' to his lordship, may appear also very undesirable to me from my point of view, and even on the same ground; you yourself confess that you have had some queer ancestors, and I quite agree with you; some of them not quite so remote, perhaps, as my revered relative yonder. For my part I have not only no respect for titles that have not been earned by public service, but their possessors do not recommend themselves to my taste. It is no satisfaction to me, sir, but very much the reverse, though you may find it difficult to credit it, that you will one day be Lord Dirleton."

"It appears to me, sir," said Jack, plaintively, "that it would have been a great advantage to Evy and myself if we had both been Foundlings."

"I do not know that," said Mr. Hulet, who by this time had worked himself into

that state of mind in which a man feels inclined to dissent from everything. "I know a Foundling—and, by Jove, I wish you would marry her instead of my niece. However, I suppose that is not to be thought of. Well, let us get on. The long and short of what you have to say, I suppose, is that your uncle cuts you out of his will if you marry Evy?"

"Out of his will, he does, sir. 'And also,' said he, 'I keep my word to the letter as to not giving you a shilling; at the same time, I will pay my debts.' At this I looked up surprised, for so far from owing me anything, he had paid off my liabilities more than once."

"Debts of honour, I suppose?" observed Mr. Hulet, dryly.

"Yes, sir; and bills and so forth," continued Jack, with simplicity. "However, my uncle was good enough to say that since his attachment towards me, and the

expectations which it had doubtless engendered, had prevented my entering into any profession, and had also given me expensive habits of life, he considered it only just that he should make me compensation. He has given me twenty thousand pounds, sir."

"The devil he has!" exclaimed Mr. Hulet. "Then he is not nearly so black as he is painted."

"I thought it very generous and high-minded of him," continued Jack, taking no notice of this doubtful compliment; "and but that my love for your niece is such that the idea would be preposterous, I protest that I never felt so inclined to obey my uncle as when he was supplying me as it were with the means of disobedience. You don't think that confession an impertinence I hope, sir."

"Quite the contrary; on the whole, indeed, Captain Heyton, and not at all the

less from your last words, I am inclined to think you are a good fellow. As to money, Evy's own fortune, present and prospective, will, added to the sum you have mentioned, form an ample provision. But I must exact certain conditions. Through no fault of your own, you have contracted tastes and habits which may be very disadvantageous to my niece's interests. Hodlin Barmby dug the grave of his own fortune, and then of his wife's, in the place where persons of your condition are apt to dig it—on the Turf; that must not happen in your case. You must give up steeple-chasing, and all which it includes; I need not indicate the items—betting, and so forth—for you are a man of honour, and will not prevaricate. I know I can trust your word—will you give it to me?"

It may seem a small thing to give up a mere pleasurable excitement for the sake

of such a lifelong treasure as a loving wife; but to men like Captain Heyton, without professional pursuits, or grave occupation of any sort, it is no slight sacrifice. Jack did not hesitate, however, for a moment.

"You have my promise, sir," said he, "though I believe that my regard for your niece would have been sufficient to restrain me from such imprudences as you hint at. You will not object to my riding the steeple-chase to-morrow, however; where, indeed, I risk little except my neck."

"By no means," answered Mr. Hulet, grimly. "I was referring to more serious contingencies. And, besides, you will not be married to-morrow, I suppose?"

Of course there was nothing in it, but it afterwards struck Jack as strange, that in his first interview with his uncle upon this same matter, he should have used a similar expression to this last, "You are not going

to be married to-morrow, I suppose." Well, of course he wasn't, still it is unpleasant to hear what we have set our hearts upon spoken of by others as problematical, or subject to vague adjournment.

"I hope, Mr. Hulet, that since matters are arranged as favourably (that is in my own case) as they are likely to be, that you will impose no unnecessary delay."

"No, sir, no; I will not," answered the other with emotion. "It would be unfair to both of you. It pleases me, of course, Captain Heyton, to know that I am conferring happiness on my niece in bestowing her on you; but you can hardly understand that this is one of the most miserable moments of what has never been a pleasurable life, and which bids fair—what remains of it—to be a very very wretched one."

Jack's kindly heart was touched; he felt

that he was about to take away from this man, failing in health, and oppressed by growing years, the prop of his life, the sunshine of his darkening days.

"Indeed, Mr. Hulet, I can understand that you are making a great sacrifice for the sake of one you love, to one who is at present a total stranger. In time, perhaps, I may grow more nearly to you. It will be my endeavour to show myself grateful for the blessing you have conferred upon me. However that may be, one thing I will gladly promise—not to take Evy far away from you. Nay, if you wish it——"

"Don't promise *that*," interrupted Mr. Hulet, in passionate warning. "I asked Evy to promise it, and she consented; but it was not right. Under this roof, it would be impossible that you two should find the happiness you deserve. Don't tempt me with the idea that it would be possible to

retain my bird, my blossom." He stopped, drew himself straightly up, and added in a firm voice, "Give me your hand, young man, and go and seek her. So far as I can give her to you, she is yours."

CHAPTER III.

THE THIN END OF THE WEDGE.

IT was not without some trepidation that Evy beheld her lover return to her across the lawn; his interview with her uncle had lasted for a full hour; and she had seen enough of their first meeting to gather that it had not taken place under very favourable auspices. What an age had that period of waiting seemed! How crowded with fears and hopes and unuttered prayers! If she had not seen him, clasped him, kissed him, if matters had been in short as they were yesterday, she might have been more

patient, if less sanguine; but having once permitted herself to believe him to be hers, the apprehension that he might not be so was intolerable.

"How dreadfully you have frightened me, dear," were her first words, as with joyous face, and bounding step, Jack once more hastened towards her; man as he was in years, in manners he was still a boy; no notions of dignity or swelldom stiffened his limbs, or made languid his air; his movements were the barometer of his feelings, and at that moment it stood at Very Fair.

"Frightened you, darling? Why should that have been?"

"Because you have been so long with my uncle. Are you sure, Jack, are you quite sure that all is well?"

"Indeed I am, my darling; matters are better than we could possibly have hoped for; and I am more than ready to sub-

scribe to all that I have heard you say respecting Mr. Hulet. He may be eccentric, but he is an excellent fellow, and a first-rate judge of character."

"He likes you, does he?" cried Evy, rapturously. "Oh, I felt sure he would."

"Nay, I meant to imply that he was very fond of *you*, my darling," said Jack, "though, indeed, it does not require much judgment to be that—but only eyes."

"But that is not at all a compliment," answered Evy, attempting to pout, but with such miserable success that she broke into a smile, accompanied by two lovely dimples, which were its constant attendants, like very young bridesmaids upon a bride. "Now do be serious, Jack, and tell me all about Lord Dirleton. How did you ever induce him to give his consent to your marriage?"

"Well, I showed him your photograph: but that was not so successful a plan as I

had expected; for it made him want to marry you himself——"

"Nonsense, sir. You are inventing all these foolish speeches to put me off. Don't deceive me, darling? Has he really forgiven you, or—oh, Jack"—there was a momentary look of embarrassment in her lover's face—"you have been disinherited; you have lost all for my unhappy sake."

"Well, I am to have twenty thousand pounds, dear, to be paid down on my marriage-day, if you call that disinheritance," said Jack. "Mr. Hulet, too, has been very liberal; and, in fact, if you and I do not have enough to live upon, that will be the fault of the housekeeper" (he looked at her, with confidence, but nevertheless as no man ought to look at his housekeeper), "who has however a most excellent character from her last place."

"Oh, my darling, how happy I ought to be," cried Evy, with a tremor in her plea-

sant voice, and a dewy softness in her loving eyes. "How happy and how thankful!"

"Then how much more I," said Jack, with simplicity. "It is said that 'the course of true love never did run smooth,' but I am sure that in our case——"

"Hush!" exclaimed Evy, hastily. "Here is Judith."

"By Jove, who is she?" inquired Jack with interest. The young lady in question had advanced from the house only so far as the flower-bed, where she discreetly occupied herself in gathering a bouquet, without taking notice of the lovers. She looked exquisitely beautiful, yet perfectly unconscious of it—or at all events unconscious of the fact that she was being admired. Her usual morning-dress had been exchanged for one somewhat smarter, and perhaps more becoming; and her magnificent hair—and her head had no other

covering—had been arranged, any woman would have seen, with more than ordinary attention to effect.

"She is Mrs. Hulet's niece, Miss Mercer," said Evy; "is she not lovely?"

"For a brunette, yes," said the captain, who had recovered from his momentary enthusiasm, and who though ingenuous, was by no means ignorant of the art of pleasing. "You know, my taste does not lie in that direction, and she is certainly a great contrast to her cousin."

"Nay, I am not really her cousin," said Evy, softly; "though I am supposed to be so. She is no relation to any of us—only a very intimate friend."

"Is she a Foundling?" inquired Jack, his mind involuntarily reverting to what Mr. Hulet had said upon that subject.

"Hush! Yes, I believe so, poor girl. Judith, dear, pray come here, and let me introduce to you Captain Heyton."

Thus addressed, Judith looked up with an air of pleased surprise, and came towards them.

"I beg your pardon, Evy," said she, "for coming into the garden, but Mrs. Hulet sent me to get her some flowers."

This unnecessary apology for her presence, and her tone of humility, touched the impressionable captain, as perhaps they were intended to do. "I am but a dependent," they seemed to say, "and would not have ventured to have interrupted the tête-à-tête of a daughter of the house and her lover, but for the orders of my patroness, which are supreme."

To see so much grace and beauty compelled to act the part of Cinderella (and in such a very becoming dress too) was almost more than man could bear.

"I think I had the pleasure of meeting you in the lane as I rode up," said he.

"You were gathering flowers there also, I observed."

"Wild ones, yes," answered she.

You would have thought by her subdued voice, and down-drooped eyes, that if she had been caught plucking a rose upon her own account in the grounds about Clif-Cottage, she would have been whipped.

"What a beautiful horse you were riding, Captain Heyton," added she, and here again, she seemed to say, "At its rider, of course, I did not look. It would have been a great liberty in a young person in my position to take notice of any gentleman visiting at this house."

"Was that Walltopper?" inquired Evy, turning to her lover. "The one you are going to ride to-morrow at the steeple-chase?"

"Oh dear no," said Jack, smiling.

"It would tire it so, my dear," observed Judith, gently.

"To be sure," said Evy, blushing rather uncomfortably. It was very stupid of her not to have thought of that; but Judith need not have reminded her of an objection so obvious.

"No, this was Mignonette," continued Jack. "A little mare of mine that carries a lady beautifully. I hope you will do me the honour of taking a ride upon her, Evy."

"Oh, I am sure I shall be most pleased," said Evy; "that is, if I am not dreadfully frightened. I have not been on horseback more than once or twice in my life."

"Oh, a child might ride Mignonette," answered the captain, "and besides, of course, I shall be by your side to take care of you."

"Ah, then I shall feel quite safe," replied Evy, simply. Her loving confidence shone forth in her sweet face, even more plainly than her words expressed it; and

Jack, upon whose arm she leant, acknowledged it by a silent pressure. Mute as it was, however, Judith observed it, and over her face stole a tender melancholy smile such as a portionless orphan might well feel, who, herself debarred from such bright hopes, beholds two lovers happy.

"Do you ride, Miss Mercer?" asked the captain in his chivalric sorrow for her unhappy state. He did not reflect that portionless orphans, unless when professionally employed in circuses, are not as a rule much accustomed to equestrian exercise. "What a blundering idiot I am," thought he directly the words had left his lips; but it was too late.

Judith gently shook her magnificent head.

"Oh, no, Captain Heyton. I have never so much as mounted a horse—not even a rocking-horse, for my childhood was not gilded by toys."

"Then it is high time you should be taught to ride," said good-natured Jack. "There are plenty of ladies' horses to be got in Balcombe, and you shall come out with me and Evy; shall she not, Evy?"

"Of course," Evy assented; but it must be confessed with no very good grace. The saying that "two is company and three is none," has an equal force when folks are on horseback as when they are on foot, and Evy would have preferred to ride with Jack, attended by a groom, rather than accompanied by her young friend, who, moreover, she shrewdly suspected of being much less afraid of a horse than herself, and therefore likely to appear to better advantage. It would be wrong to say she felt jealous of Judith—for she would have scouted such an idea as preposterous, but she thought that Jack had made himself rather unnecessarily civil to her. Of course, he had behaved so out of compassion; but

how absurd—to say no worse—it had been in Judith to have excited that feeling. It was not fair, towards her uncle, by whom Judith was treated exactly the same as his own niece—except perhaps that with the former he used a more studious politeness—nor was it pleasant even as regarded herself.

For the first time, it struck her that the unanimous opinion of her own sex, and the intuition of her uncle, with respect to Judith, might after all be correct, and that she had been mistaken in standing up for her. More especially did she feel convinced of one fact, that Judith Mercer was very well qualified to stand up for herself.

And yet when the day was done, and Jack had gone, and Judith coming to her chamber threw her arms about her, in sisterly fashion, and congratulated her upon her happy choice, the praise of her lover

was so sweet, and the sympathy with herself apparently so genuine, that all her displeasure vanished, and her good word, if it had been asked for, would have been as much at Judith's service, as her good offices had been of old.

CHAPTER IV.

THE STEEPLE-CHASE.

THE steeple-chases at Balcombe, although they have a place in the Racing Calendar, are by no means the splendid spectacle we behold at Liverpool, or the Curragh. The grand stand is a very trumpery affair, built to serve for the occasion only, and with bills stuck on it addressed, "To timber merchants and others," notifying that the materials will be on sale the ensuing day. The majority of the races are local; confined to horses that have been regularly hunted with the Balcombe fox-hounds, or to those

belonging to farmers in the neighbourhood. The jockeys are local, too, and so are the tailors that clothe them. Their smart jackets are bulgy at the back, and if their buckskin breeches look like another skin, it is that of the rhinoceros — an animal whose garments being forgotten at the Creation, have since been supplied exclusively at second-hand. Instead of three or four rows of carriages lining both sides of the "run in," there are but a few score vehicles in all; for the "views" in vogue at Balcombe are antagonistic to sporting "events," and when that annual abomination, the steeple-chases, are about to take place, its pulpits rarely fail to give forth a warning sound. Upon the present occasion there were but a handful of really creditable "turn outs," among which the drag of the regiment quartered at the neighbouring assize town disputed the palm for neatness of appointment with a

waggonette and four from Lucullus Mansion. Mrs. Hodlin Barmby did not give in to the Balcombe "views," but always organized an expedition to the steeple-chase, thereby affording to her husband his whitest day in the year. As he sat on the box-seat of the elongated vehicle, "tooling" its four grays with all the skill of Plato's pupil in the fable, the fatal heath of Newmarket, the deadly downs of Epsom, were forgotten, and he seemed once more to have his own again, and to be spending it. Notwithstanding that some of his guests held up their hands against this wickedness, the waggonette was more patronized to-day than usual, through a sort of esprit de corps. For no less than two members of the table d'hôte, namely, the captain and Mr. Paragon, were to ride for the Balcombe Cup, the only prize to be contended for by gentlemen riders. It had not been the latter's original intention so to do, but

the fire of rivalry had been kindled within him by the speculations and talk about Walltopper.

He wished to show the public that he also possessed an animal worthy of their attention in his black mare Nemesis, upon which, too, he had an idea that he himself looked rather an attractive object in a white cap and scarlet jacket. His chief motive, however, in putting in this striking appearance was the wish expressed by Judith to see him in the costume in question, which he had rashly confided to her that he possessed; for she had of late attained over him a marvellous ascendency, born of her beauty, but strengthened by the fact that she was now in independent circumstances, and need not accept him unless she pleased. As to her Augustus, he had never heard of him, and would have been in no wise jealous of any such poor devil if he had. A man might paint a

sheep ever so well, he would have argued, had the existence of such a rival been suggested to him, but he could never be put in competition by any sensible young woman, with a rival who possessed forty thousand real ones, with the wool on, upon the fertile plains of Morumbidgee. And Judith, with a little bouquet of scarlet and white geraniums, of which no one but herself and Mr. Paragon knew the significance —was on the course, in Mr. Hulet's carriage, along with that gentleman and Evy. Mrs. Hulet had expressed herself strongly against patronizing races, whereupon her husband—who in reality objected to them more than she did—had instantly determined upon being present, and upon taking the two girls with him. Distressed as she always was to see her aunt and uncle quarrel, Evy was not sorry that the disputation ended as it did, for it would have almost broken her heart to have missed

seeing her lover ride the race. At the same time she was consumed with apprehensions for his personal safety.

"That wide jump in front of us is surely very dangerous," said she to Mr. Hodlin Barmby, of whom she was a great favourite, and who had come to the side of the carriage expressly to give her information about the proceedings of the day.

"Not a bit, my dear Miss Evy; or at least not to the riders, about whom (or at least about one of whom) I conclude you are more solicitous than about the horses. No, no—if there is danger anywhere it is at that double fence in the hollow. An earth-wall and two ditches are in my opinion too much 'for a fly,' and it wants a clever horse to take it in, 'one, two.' But it's an easy course from first to last, and in my opinion the most speedy nag will win."

"And which *is* the most speedy nag?"

"Oh, old Walltopper, without doubt. He used to be a flat-racer, but being of an infernal temper, he broke away from his horses one day at Ascot, and cleared the rails, and they do say the people's heads, so splendidly that Dirleton (or rather Heyton, for he is master of his uncle's horses, you know) made a steeple-chaser of him; but he is not much of a jumper in my opinion. Paragon's Irish mare is worth a dozen of him, except for timber, but you must not tell the captain that, and here he comes."

A black velvet cap, top-boots, and a great-coat are not a costume calculated to set off the human form divine to the greatest advantage; yet Evy thought she had never seen Jack looking so charmingly. His easy air, with the prospect of so many dangers before him, the confidence with which he spoke of Walltopper, and above all his behaviour to her uncle, which had

liking in it as well as respect, transported her with pleasure. So far from grudging Judith her few artless questions to the captain about sporting affairs, it pleased her to find that being to the point, and by no means exhibiting a ridiculous ignorance, they seemed to interest him. She quite felt for the poor girl when that foolish Mr. Paragon, wearing no great-coat, and who in his scarlet jacket and white cap looked distressingly like a monkey, came up and joined them, and began paying her compliments, which it must have been embarrassing for her—in the presence of one who was acquainted with her engagement—to receive. Whatever she may have felt, however, Judith showed no trace of confusion, and, indeed, exhibited a coolness of judgment in a certain bet which she made with her admirer, that drew forth the captain's warmest approbation.

"Come," said he, "Miss Mercer," when

the former gentleman had gone to be weighed, "you have made a very pretty book on this race. Do you feel inclined to hedge a little and back Nemesis against Walltopper ?"

"No, indeed, Captain Heyton," answered she significantly, "unless at least you laid me very long odds."

"But the betting is even," remonstrated Jack.

"I know that," responded she, "but having my own opinion of the merits of the rider, I should require several points above the current quotation."

A reply which, while it evidently pleased the captain, was unintelligible to poor Evy, who knew nothing whatever of "points," "quotations," or racing matters of any kind. For her part, she was convinced that Jack ought to win, and would have bet ten to one upon his doing so against the field.

The local race that was to have preceded that for the cup did not come off, through an insufficiency of entries, so the contest between the gentlemen riders became the first on the card. The field was a large one, consisting of eleven competitors, each of whom took his preliminary canter up the course. Evy's face lit up with loving pride, as Jack went by them on his bay, and even Mr. Hulet acknowledged that that young fellow looked well on horseback. Mr. Paragon, also, knew how to ride, and the black mare he bestrode attracted much commendation.

"Barring accidents," explained Mr. Hodlin Barmby to Mr. Bullion, who had happened to take a walk that morning in the direction of the course, and would have enjoyed the spectacle very much, but for the reflection that it would be impossible to conceal the fact of his having beheld it from his wife—"barring accidents, the race will be between the bay and black."

"Barring accidents," repeated Evy, in horrified accents. "Do you expect there will be an accident, then, Mr. Barmby?"

"Well, yes; there's sure to be somebody rolled over, you know; there always is in a big race like this. But we've had a great deal of wet, and it will be soft falling."

This was no more comfort to Evy than the information that there was "snug lying at the Abbey," was to Bob Acres; and when Judith observed rather maliciously,

"Oh, I think a little danger makes it all the more exciting," she turned round on her with the severest speech she had ever made in her life.

"You are like the girl in the 'Last Days of Pompeii,' Judith, who wanted to see the wild beast kill the man."

Judith laughed, but did not reply, for at that moment the horses were being marshalled for the start upon the hill at the

back of the carriage in one long undulating line of colour; there was a silence, during which all the spectators seemed to be standing on tip-toe, and then the flag was dropped, and the horses came down the slope like a rainbow that had become a whirlwind. A shaking of the turf, a thunder in the air, one flash of colour, and they had passed by, and were nearing the water jump. The distance had been so short that they were still altogether as they took it, when in an instant there were three gaps in the hurrying line, which showed that that number of horses had fallen; two of them, however, with their riders soon scrambled up again, and pursued the rest, while the third was led away. Evy heard some one expressing sympathy as if for some catastrophe, but tender-hearted as she was, she had no compassion, no attention, no eyes, in short, just then for any object save one—a certain yellow

jacket and black cap, upon a noble bay, which was gradually drawing ahead of the other competitors.

"Take this, Miss Evy," said good-natured Mr. Barmby, handing her his race-glass, "and see how the captain is making the mud fly. If he can keep that pace, he will distance the whole lot of them. I only hope that the consciousness that somebody's bright eyes are watching him may not make him press Walltopper too much before he gets to the double fence. See, he has cleared those hurdles like a bird."

"Oh how beautiful it is," cried Evy, in a rapture, and scarcely hearing what was said by those about her. "I never knew what a horse could do before! I am sure I don't wonder that you gentlemen should be so fond of——oh dear, that is the dangerous place, is it not, which he is coming to now?" The glass shook in her hands, so that she could hardly watch the pro-

gress of her lover as he drew near the fence; but there seemed to be no abatement in the horse's speed.

"He will not be so mad as to take it at a fly, I do hope," muttered Mr. Barmby. "Is he over yet, Miss Evy? for I can't make him out at this distance."

"Yes—no. Oh, good heavens, Mr. Barmby, he is down!"

"My dear Evy, pray don't make a scene," remonstrated her uncle; "people who ride steeple-chases must expect a tumble now and then." Mr. Hulet's face was troubled notwithstanding his words, as he snatched the glass, which indeed had become useless to her, from his niece's trembling hands, and gazed through it attentively. "He is not hurt, Evy," said he confidently. "He is on his legs, though the horse is down."

"Oh, never mind the horse," cried Evy, half hysterically; "are you sure that he is on his legs?"

"On two legs, yes; but he wants to be on four," observed Mr. Hulet, who was rather ashamed of himself for having exhibited apprehension upon the captain's account. "He is trying to pull his horse out of the ditch. There's Paragon on the black mare flying over his head from the bank, which must be deuced unpleasant; the others seem to be looking at it. What do you make out of the situation, Barmby?"

Mr. Hodlin Barmby took the glass, and after gazing through it attentively for a few moments, handed it once more to Evy.

"There's a sight which will do your eyes good, my dear young lady. Heyton's up, and after them."

Eight out of the eleven starters had in one fashion or another got over the double fence, Nemesis leading them by a whole field; and the captain himself was once more mounted and in full pursuit.

"He's a good-plucked one, Hulet, that

young fellow, is he not?" continued good-natured Mr. Barmby, glad to have an opportunity of praising Jack.

"He has plenty of determination," answered Mr. Hulet dryly, "though it's a pity he should waste it upon steeple-chasing. I suppose the young fellow has no chance now," added he presently, with an interest that rather belied his former didactic tone, "or else—by Jove! he seems picking up."

The course was a circular one, and the horses were now all well within sight, taking their fences separately, and with considerable intervals between them. "He *is* picking up," answered Mr. Barmby, confidently. "He has passed four of them, and will make it hot for the rest of them, except Paragon."

"Mr. Paragon's horse looks more tired than his to my eyes," observed Judith, quietly.

"Your eyes are very good, young lady," returned Mr. Barmby. "He has pressed the mare too much up the hill, and when there was no occasion to do so. I always said that Paragon couldn't ride; but he has got too much ahead to be caught, I fear."

"The bay is going faster every moment," exclaimed Evy, eagerly, who had not wasted her attention upon any of its rivals for a single second. "I'd give—oh, what would I not give!—that Walltopper should win."

"What does Miss Mercer say to that?" inquired Mr. Bullion, archly, who, on the rare occasions when he escaped from his wife's surveillance, was given to playfulness of remark.

"I wish Captain Heyton to win," said Judith, coolly.

"It would please him very much to hear that, no doubt," said the banker, "and I

shall certainly tell him; but what would Mr. Paragon say if I was to tell him?"

"He'd say he did not believe you, I suppose," said Judith, naïvely. At which both gentlemen laughed.

"I dare say he would," answered Mr. Bullion. "He has — ahem — confidence enough for anything. He actually offered, in the presence of Mrs. Bullion, to bet me —me—a ten-pound note upon this race, and expressed a wish to see the money down."

"He has passed them all except the white and scarlet one," exclaimed Evy, enthusiastically, on whom this little talk had been utterly lost. "There is only half a field between them."

There was really a possibility of the race being a near one after all, for the superior speed of the bay had brought him past the other horses one by one, and into the second place; though to be sure, he was not a good second.

"That black mare is a wonder," observed Mr. Barmby, "considering how Paragon has pushed her; she hopped in and out of that double fence like a bird. If the captain had topped the wall instead of clearing it, he would have been at the post by this time. What a pace Walltopper keeps up; if that last fence was a severe one, instead of a bank and hedge, it would not be such a 'moral' for Nemesis, even now—by Jove! she has refused it."

A roar of voices—some in applause, some in disappointment—here burst forth. The leading horse, which to practised eyes had already shown signs of fatigue, had swerved at the hedge, and his rider had to take him back again for the jump. Through this mishap he lost nearly half a minute, and Walltopper, urged with whip and spur, was coming down upon him like a greyhound slipped at a hare.

"That young man rides like a madman," ejaculated Mr. Hulet, in genuine apprehension at this increase of speed. "One would think there was no fence before him at all."

"He intends to win or break his neck, that's what it means, sir," whispered Mr. Barmby in the other's ear. "When I was in love—and if Letty had been looking on—I should have done just the same at his age."

"But other people are looking on," observed Mr. Hulet, peevishly, "and it makes my heart go—for one—to see such things, and it's excessively thoughtless of him to try people's constitutions in this way. By heaven, he's over."

"Then he's a dead man," muttered the other with an oath, which, however, he intended for a prayer.

"No no, he's over the fence, I mean. The horse took it in his stride."

"Well done, Walltopper," cried Mr. Barmby, excitedly, and waving his hat. "Heaven help poor Paragon, if the captain catches him in the straight."

And the captain did catch him in the straight, just as he was flying past Mr. Hulet's carriage. The excellent black laid back her ears as she heard the thunder of her enemy's approach, and made one desperate effort, aided by every art her rider knew; but the bay, covered with foam, and black as herself with sweat, flashed by her, and reached the post two lengths ahead, and the next instant the shouting crowd had rushed in behind them as water closes behind the hand.

CHAPTER V.

THE DAY BEFORE DEATH.

IN spite of his denunciations of Captain Heyton's foolhardiness as a rider, it is certain that Mr. Hulet's behaviour towards the winner of the steeple-chase was more cordial after that event than before. Unathletic and even averse to all exertion as he was himself, the old valetudinarian could still admire pluck and vigour in another, or perhaps he rightly judged that the virtues of determination and energy which the captain had exhibited in that stern chase, would not be absent from him on more important occasions.

At all events he now openly favoured the young fellow's suit, while singularly enough the captain's visits to Cliff Cottage were equally welcome to Mrs. Hulet. Neither of the pair made the least objection to his taking Evy out upon equestrian excursions, which would have been more pleasant to her had not Judith generally joined them. As her heart had foreboded, that young lady did exhibit considerably better horsemanship, or rather, she possessed greater physical courage than herself; and was infinitely more apt a pupil in the riding lessons. She always professed herself as "quite ready to stop at home," protested that "her dear Evy would be much happier without her," but nevertheless — or probably in consequence of such judicious disclaimers—contrived to make one of the party *vice* the captain's groom, left at Balcombe to charm the chamber-maids at Lucullus Mansion. She made not the least

attempt to flirt with the captain, but it seemed to Evy that she laid herself out to please him rather more than was, under the circumstances, quite becoming. For instance, upon the day of the steeple-chase, not content with having told Mr. Bullion (who, nevertheless, she felt pretty sure would repeat it) that she hoped the captain would win, she expressed her satisfaction to him on his victory point blank. "Oh, Captain Hulet, I am so glad you have beaten Mr. Paragon."

The captain was but human, and to say the truth, was not displeased at this expression of a preference for himself over one who was understood to be an especial admirer, if not the positively accepted swain of Miss Mercer; while Evy, on the contrary, was not a little outraged.

"My dear Judith, how can you say so!" remonstrated she.

"Oh, I am sure I beg your pardon, my

dear," answered Judith, with a bright smile at the captain (as much as to say, "See, she will not even let me congratulate you"); "but I am not an heiress like you, Evy, remember, and the fact is that twelve pairs of gloves—which was poor Mr. Paragon's bet upon himself—are 'a consideration' to me."

It was impossible to be angry with Judith after so naïve a confession, nor did she repeat the offence in question again, at all events in Evy's presence; but what annoyed the latter even more than these little infractions upon her own rights of property in Jack was the provoking airs of patronage that Judith gave herself, not socially of course, for indeed she still persisted in that rôle of "companion" and "dependent" which had already done her such good service, but morally; she assumed to herself the position of one whom stern necessity had long acquainted with the ways of

the world, and treated Evy as an ingénue. Whenever the latter showed her inferiority to herself, no matter whether it was in riding or repartee, Judith evinced no triumph, yet somehow suggested by her manner—if it was but a glance or a smile—that dear Evy could not be expected to do better. A course of conduct that had the effect (which perhaps it was intended to have) of making "dear Evy" nervous, and depriving her of self-reliance even in circumstances to which she would have been otherwise equal.

It must not be supposed, however, notwithstanding all Judith's astuteness and policy, that that young woman succeeded in substituting her image for a single instant in the captain's faithful heart for that of his Evy. He admired the former exceedingly, accepted her pretty speeches—which were even prettier, he noticed, when she chanced to be left alone with him than

when her dear friend was present—with great readiness, and allowed to himself that she had the best wits of any girl he had ever seen. But his judgment never failed to the extent of making any comparison between the two, or of doubting that Evy Carthew, for goodness, sterling good sense, delicacy of feeling, and, in a word, for lovableness, was worth a score of Judith Mercers.

The engagement between the captain and Evy had now been made public, and among the first to come over to congratulate the latter on that event was Mr. De Coucy. He had been absent from Balcombe for many weeks, some of which he had passed with his relative, Lord Dirleton, and this was the first visit he had paid to Cliff Cottage. Evy felt just a little nervous at meeting him on such an occasion, remembering that fragment of a love passage between them on the day of the picnic,

but the old gentleman at once set her at ease by alluding to it in the most bare-faced manner. "You recollect, my dear Miss Evy, that day when I made such a fool of myself in Birbeck Wood?"

Evy blushed, and made a little gesture of dissent.

"Well, if you don't recollect the day," continued he, with wilful misapprehension of her meaning, "you recollect the circumstance, for you are blushing for me, as you well may do. I have been doing my best since then to atone for my presumption by endeavouring to make matters straight for you and Jack. But the old lord, my cousin, is as fixed as a bayonet, and quite as dangerous to tackle. Nephew Dick, I fear, must have Dirleton, though Jack will have something infinitely better——"

"What? Is he disinherited after all, then?" interrupted Evy. "Oh, why was I so weak as to believe him?"

"Believe what?" cried Mr. De Coucy, in great perturbation. ("Here's a mess," thought he; "I wonder what the young fellow did tell her!") "Jack deceive you, my dear Miss Evy! Impossible!"

"He told me that his uncle, though by no means satisfied with his engagement, had promised him twenty thousand pounds."

"That's quite right," said Mr. De Coucy, with an air of much relief. "I only meant to say that it might have been more."

"I see," answered Evy, sadly. "In my selfish love for Captain Heyton I did not consider his position. Twenty thousand pounds seemed to me a great fortune. I did not reflect upon how much more he might have had had his choice been a wiser one."

"Nay, a wiser one it could not have been," answered Mr. De Coucy, positively, "though he had searched the world through

for a bride. It was idiotic of me to speak of mere money in a case where, believe me, dear Miss Evy, money ought not to weigh one feather's weight. I should have liked to think you were to have Dirleton, I confess; but after all, what does it matter?"

"Not to me, indeed," said Evy, sorrowfully; "but to him—alas, alas!"—and here she burst into most unaccustomed tears—"what have I done?"

"Made a most excellent young fellow happy beyond his deserts, Miss Evy. Nay, if you take my tittle-tattle so much to heart, you will make me wretched with the thought of what I have done! Look here—here is the ring I promised you, and which I have had made to fit your taper finger; you will not wear it now? Well, in a fortnight hence you will have sworn to obey somebody who shall ask you to put it on. Pray, pray, for my sake, dear

Miss Evy, don't make Jack my enemy by telling him of this stupid blunder of mine! You promise? And with what a forgiving smile! Ah, if I can only bring it about that Lord Dirleton shall see and know you, I am sure his heart would melt, and then he would kick Dick to the Deuce."

Evy could not but smile at the old gentleman's energy, and thank him for his goodwill.

"I will do my best for Jack's sake with Lord Dirleton, if I ever get the chance, Mr. De Coucy; but I have small hope of being successful. His heart seems very hard."

"No, indeed, it is as soft as butter, where he takes a fancy. He would give five years of his life, at this moment, to be reconciled to his favourite nephew; only he has passed his word that he will never consent to let him 'intermarry with regicides.' Think of your being a regicide!

By-the-by, where is that confounded picture of which I have heard so much?"

"It is in my uncle's study. You will find him there, and he will be very pleased to show it you, I'm sure," sighed Evy, who in her heart of hearts wished the portrait of her illustrious ancestor at the bottom of the sea.

She was glad to be alone to think over what Mr. De Coucy had just told her, though there would have been no need for him to do so, had she ever soberly reviewed the matter in her own mind.

Of selfishness she had indeed accused herself unjustly, but it was doubtless true that in her rapturous delight at finding Jack her own, she had lost sight of the penalties to which he had subjected himself in order to become so. It was too late now to give him up even if her heart could have consented to such a sacrifice,

but for that very reason it reproached her all the more.

In the meantime Mr. De Coucy had entered the study, and was already listening to the eulogium which Mr. Hulet was always prepared to pronounce upon the original of his beloved picture.

"You are quite sure that that *is* his portrait?" observed the visitor, when it was quite finished.

"Sure—of course I am!" replied his host, with the indignation of some exhibitor of ancient relics, who has been accused of buying them in Birmingham. "Why, who else should it be?"

"And you've taken measures to certify the fact—I mean that he did cut the king's head off?"

"Of course I have. It's just as much an historical fact, sir, as that of the execution itself. The only question in dispute is, 'Who was the Martyr?' My revered

ancestor, in common with many another illustrious patriot at the Restoration, sealed with his blood—— Confound it, madam, what brings you here?"

These last words were caused by the unexpected entrance of Mrs. Hulet, and were pronounced with uncommon energy. That lady, who "held her own" (a phrase which generally implies somewhat more than it describes) in all other parts of the house, was not free of the study, the inviolability of which her husband maintained with the rigour of King Alfred at Atherling, or any other monarch driven to his last stronghold.

"Well, I'm sure," said she, stung by his violent tone, and gathering confidence from the presence of Mr. De Coucy, "you need not grin at me like that, Mr. Hulet, showing your teeth like a rat in a corner; I only came for the newspaper."

Mr. Hulet did not reply, he had been

exceedingly annoyed by having his eloquence cut short upon the only topic on which, to do him justice, he was wont to dilate, and his temper was now so exasperated by his wife's words, that he would not trust himself to answer them. This silence Mrs. Hulet took for submission, or at least as a sign that her lord and master was ashamed of himself for his recent outburst, and instead of being mitigated thereby, she thought it a good opportunity for reprisals.

"Well, I won't stop," said she, "where I am not wanted, else I do think, Mr. De Coucy, that it is my duty to rescue you from the infliction under which I see you suffer. It is as difficult to keep that Jack Ketch yonder" (pointing disdainfully to the ancestral portrait) "out of Mr. Hulet's talk as it was to keep the Blessed Martyr whom he butchered out of Mr. Dick's memorial."

With this double-barrelled shot at her husband's hobby, Mrs. Hulet flounced out of the study, and sought her bedroom, where she dropped into a chair, and found solace for her excited nerves in restoratives. She took her dinner upstairs that day, while her husband sat over his almost untasted meal with the young ladies; she was not without well-founded apprehensions of the effect of her own audacity; for the fact was, when their unhappy reunion was agreed upon, it was distinctly stipulated by Mr. Hulet that his historic ancestor—over whom they had had many a quarrel years ago—should be exempt from her satire. And now she had stigmatized him as a butcher!

Mr. and Mrs. Hulet occupied separate apartments, so there was no fear of his "having it out" with her in those watches of the night so often devoted to the great who-shall-be-master question of married

life, but conscious that the conflict could not be postponed for ever, and that her husband's wrath would only be the warmer for nursing, she joined the family circle in the evening. The knowledge that she was in the wrong—for she knew that irritation was no excuse for breaking a compact—by no means induced her to admit it; else an expression of regret would probably have set matters on a better footing between the unhappy pair than they had been for months. But it was a maxim of this poor lady's never to admit herself to be in fault, and especially to her husband. There was a stormy scene between them, scarcely mitigated by the presence of the two girls, and which lasted far into the night. Evy, after an ineffectual attempt to reconcile them, sought her own room in great distress. The last words her aunt had spoken were very bitter ones. "You wish me dead, Mr. Hulet, I am well aware, but

I mean to live as long as I can, if it is only to vex you." To which her uncle replied with some expressions of cold contempt. Evy sat up in her chamber listening to the war of words, which continued to come up confusedly from beneath, and with tenderest pity in her heart for both combatants. How terrible it was to think that so kind and generous a man as her uncle, so gentle and well meaning a woman as her aunt, should act in this shocking manner towards one another because they were man and wife.

As brother and sister, that is in a relation of life where separation was comparatively easy, they would doubtless have got on far better; as friends, even under the same roof, she had had evidence that they could harmonize excellently well; whereas it was now quite painful to behold them together. The natures of each seemed changed, their wholesomeness to poison,

their sweets to gall, by contact with the other. Was it humanly possible, or rather could the Powers of Evil so effect it, that Jack and she should become one day like that? She shuddered at the monstrous thought, then put it from her, like some nightmare dream that has terrified us in slumber, but which we are well convinced can never be realized. Presently she heard the drawing-room door closed with a clang, evidently by the hand of passion. and then to her great relief the steps of her uncle as he retired to his own apartment. If her aunt had been alone, she would have descended at once to comfort her, but a hushed sound of voices, very different from those to which they had succeeded, satisfied her that Judith was with Mrs. Hulet.

After a while the drawing-room window was softly opened, and the two women came out upon the lawn and paced up and down

fated that her mind should dwell on every shadowy hint that came to her that night 'twixt sleep and waking, in cautious movement and muffled sound.

CHAPTER VI.

JUDITH'S SUGGESTION.

VY'S first thought in the morning was upon the quarrel, so much more serious than their ordinary disagreements, that had taken place between her uncle and aunt on the previous evening. When they had parted in the drawing-room it had certainly not been healed, but she had fancied that some time during the night she had heard Mr. Hulet's footsteps about the house, and it was possible that in the meanwhile, he had sought a reconciliation with his wife. If she herself had been in the like position, it

would have been a natural course enough, she thought, to have adopted; for how could one go to rest with such anger in one's breast, as he must needs have been tormented with? She took no side in these unhappy occurrences with either party, far less indulged, as Judith did, in railing accusation of them both, but she knew, whoever was in the wrong, that if an attempt at making matters up had been made at all, it would have proceeded from her uncle. At breakfast, to which meal her aunt never came down, this idea received some confirmation from the expression of his countenance, which was grave and sad, but by no means stern, as of one who is not only no longer wrathful, but who repents of wrath. On the other hand, it might have been that he had made overtures of peace and failed; he was only calm, perhaps, because he had made up his mind to do what he had often threatened, but had

hitherto from fear of the world's ridicule refrained from doing, namely, to separate from his wife a second time. If this were so, much as Evy had hailed their reconciliation, she could not grieve at such a resolve. Separation was infinitely to be preferred to a union that only bred discontent, not to say hate; and as for the ridicule of the world, the unhappy pair could scarcely earn more of that by their divorce than their daily disagreements had brought upon them.

The morning meal was carried on in almost total silence. Judith, who rarely spoke in Mr. Hulet's presence, though she manifested little reticence about him or his affairs behind his back, never opened her lips except to eat: she was one of those few young women who make good breakfasts, such as young men do: a very wholesome sign, and the evidence, some say, of a good conscience. Mr. Hulet's amount of food

at that meal rivalled that "glass of green curaçoa and a pickled walnut," which is said to be the morning rations of some fast gentlemen of the town. Not indeed that he took liquors and pickles, far from it; the parallel held good only as respected quantity; he was well content with half a digestive biscuit soaked in his tea. But on this particular occasion his appetite seemed to be unequal even to that moderate provision. He played with his spoon with an absent and yet anxious air—the air of one who listens for some expected sound—and when spoken to, he started and flushed up, which, nervous as he was, Evy had never before known him to do. "I am afraid you are not so well as usual, uncle," were certainly not words that would have ordinarily put him into confusion, or cause him to drop his spoon; yet now they did so. Evy was glad for his sake to see that Judith was too much occu-

pied with the contents of her plate to observe this, though she had been watching him narrowly just before, as she had an unpleasant habit of doing; Evy herself, when somewhat self-occupied, had often looked up suddenly to find Judith's eyes fixed upon her with a searching expression, which had brought the colour into her cheeks, when she had happened to be thinking of Jack.

"Not well? No, I am not quite well, Evy," Mr. Hulet had answered.

This was a strange reply, she thought, for it was his custom, though she for her part judiciously ignored it, to consider himself always very far from well; and what was still more curious was, that on this particular morning he looked very indisposed, and might have been expected to issue a worse bulletin than usual.

"It is the heat, I think," he went on; "it was so hot last night that I got scarcely any sleep at all."

"Then that accounts for my hearing you move about in the night," said Evy, her hopes that a reconciliation had been effected falling to zero.

"No, not I. I never left my room."

"Indeed! I also thought I heard you, Mr. Hulet," said Judith, quietly. She raised her eyes to his, and regarded him very steadfastly.

"No," said he, decisively, but without the irritability that contradiction generally excited in him. "You are both mistaken; it was not I."

"Then it must have been my aunt," remarked Evy. "She has not yet rung her bell, though it is past her usual time. She doubtless feels fatigued."

To this neither of her companions responded one word. There was no look of contemptuous incredulity, however, upon her uncle's face such as an allusion to his wife's invalidism now generally awoke;

and Judith's lips also forbore to wear their usual cynical smile. A quarter of an hour passed, during which the latter finished her meal, yet showed no inclination to leave the table; while Mr. Hulet delayed over his sopped biscuit in a very unusual manner.

"Why, you have not opened your newspaper, uncle," said Evy, surprised to see the copy of yesterday's "Times," which it was his custom to peruse at breakfast, still lying in its wrapper beside him.

"I had forgotten it," said he, taking it up at once, but unfolding it, not as usual, with fussy impatience, but very slowly, and waiting after the rustle of each fold, as one who does not wish to dull or interrupt his sense of hearing.

"It is no use waiting for aunt to send down for her breakfast," observed Evy, presently; "some more tea had better be made for her. Oh, here is Jane at last."

It was the lady's-maid who entered, but without that prim and exclusive air that Mrs. Hulet's own attendant—who had lived with her for years, was the chief of the domestic staff, and sometimes disputed the sovereignty even of her mistress—was wont to wear.

"If you please, sir, mistress is not in her room."

"Not in her room!" echoed Evy in alarm, then looked mechanically towards her uncle.

"Eh, what?" said he, putting down the news-sheet and speaking in an absent way, like one who finds it difficult to attend to a matter. "What is that you say, Jane?"

"Mrs. Hulet is not in her room, sir; has never been in her room all night, or at least not to bed. The bed has not been slept in."

Not a word said Judith, but kept her watchful face on Mr. Hulet's as he turned

an inquiring look from one to the other, and met her own.

"Do you know anything about this, Judith?" said he, sharply.

"Nothing, sir. I went to my room last night when Mrs. Hulet did. It was very late, if you remember, and my impression was that she intended to retire to rest at once."

"This is very distressing, very alarming," observed Mr. Hulet, nervously. "Can anybody suggest any possible explanation of my wife's absence?"

"I trust mistress didn't go down again to the cliff walk last night after Miss Judith had left her," observed the maid, with a frightened look.

"That is not at all likely," observed Mr. Hulet. "It is a spot I have always warned her against even in the day-time."

This reply was scarcely conclusive, as the fact of his having warned his recalci-

trant spouse against going anywhere was always a temptation with her to visit the place. That objection, however, could not be urged just then, and other suggestions to account for Mrs. Hulet's absence were therefore made—none of which were very probable. She might have gone for an early walk into Balcombe—so early that she must have sat up all night to take it. Or she might have walked in her sleep before she went to sleep. These explanations, in short, were felt to be untenable even by those who proposed them. A search was instituted throughout the house and grounds in which everybody took part, but without noise. A solemn hush pervaded the little household, such as arises from a sense of serious calamity.

"It is my opinion, miss," whispered Jane confidentially to Evy, "that missus has left home for good and all."

"Why so, Jane?"

"Well, miss, it is idle to deny that she and master were not on the best of terms; and last night there was a battle royal between them. My mistress rang the drawing-room bell in the middle of it, and bade me get to bed, for she should not require my services. I shall never forget how they two looked when I went in. I thought to myself it was quite lucky Miss Judith was with them."

"Why lucky?" inquired Evy, pretending not to understand the other's meaning.

"Well, perhaps I should not say 'lucky,' miss, for I am sure master would not hurt a fly; but my poor dear mistress could certainly be very trying at times to any man's temper."

It was not the hideous notion of personal violence suggested by these words which made Evy's heart stand still as she listened to them, for she knew that such an idea was ridiculous, but the use of the term

"poor dear," and the quiet adoption of the past tense; this woman, who knew her mistress well, seemed to have taken it for granted that Mrs. Hulet had fled from her own roof for ever, if she had not found refuge in death itself.

"I hope things are not so bad as you think, Jane, that is, that my aunt has taken no such extreme step as to leave her home."

Jane shook her head. "No, Miss Evy," returned she, gravely, "she has not done that; leastways, in the manner you suppose. She would have taken some things with her if she had done that, you see; if it was but her bonnet and shawl. And there they are hanging up in their usual place."

"Good heavens, Jane, what on earth do you suppose she has done?"

"Well, miss," answered Jane, dropping her voice to a stealthy whisper. "I do

think it is only too probable as she has committed——Lor', Miss Judith, what a turn you did give me! coming upon one all of a sudden at a time like this."

"I didn't mean to frighten you, Jane," said Judith, quietly. "But what is that which you think your mistress has committed?"

"Lor', miss, nothing; at least, I was only going to say that I was afraid that she had committed a sad mistake in leaving master in this kind of way which is sure to make people talk—instead of separating from him by mutual agreement as she did before. She can't a-got a-clambering up them rocks, and hiding in the caverns, just to give him a good fright I suppose?"

Jane gazed at the indented face of the cliff, up which it would have taken an expert gull catcher "all he knew" to have climbed ten feet, and tried to appear impressed with this new theory of the cause

of poor Mrs. Hulet's absence—it must be confessed not with great success.

"You are not telling the truth, Jane," said Judith, sternly; "and it is the duty of all persons under such circumstances as these to tell all they suspect as well as all they know. You were about to say that you thought Mrs. Hulet had committed suicide. You will have to repeat that at the inquest, before the coroner, remember."

"Oh, lor', I trust not, miss," exclaimed Jane, in inexpressible alarm. "I do hope you won't go telling upon me for having taken such a foolish—such a wicked idea into my head."

"As to its being foolish—wiser people than you will have to judge of that," said Judith, coldly; "and as to its being wicked—nobody can help their thoughts."

"I think it is very wicked," broke in Evy, indignantly. "Why should Jane, or anybody, imagine that my aunt should have

committed self-murder, Judith?' I beg that Jane will not repeat such an idea to any persons, no matter who they may be. I cannot imagine anything more likely to distress my uncle, who is already in a most miserable state, as you can see."

"You think that Mrs. Hulet fell over the cliff walk by accident then, as was first suggested?" rejoined Judith.

"I think nothing of the sort," exclaimed Evy, angrily, "except that you ought to be ashamed of yourself for talking so coolly of the possibility of so terrible a mischance. I hope and pray that this mysterious affair may be all cleared up without any such shocking solution. If you really thought what you say, Judith, I should consider you a very hard-hearted and ungrateful girl."

"Yes; that is because you are so impulsive, Evy," returned Juliet, quietly. "Your affections are so strong that they weaken

your sense of duty. As to my being hard-hearted and ungrateful, I should be open to both those charges if I did not feel, as I do, most resolute to see justice done. I owe very much (as you so delicately hinted) to Mrs. Hulet, and it is for that very reason that I am not so much inclined to consult other people's feelings, but rather to have this matter sifted to the bottom."

"If you mean to suggest that my uncle's behaviour to his wife, Judith, was cruel or tyrannical to the extent of driving her out of this house——"

"We know that much," interrupted Judith, coldly; "that at least. She may have magnified her troubles, but that the sense she entertained of them has caused her to leave her home (unless that cliff-walk suggestion is the correct one) is, in my opinion, certain. For my part, I shall feel thankful if it turns out that she has done no worse."

"Pray do not raise your voice, Judith," said Evy, earnestly, "for my uncle is quite near, and I should not wish him to suffer the pain that your words inflict on me. What I have to say in answer to your most unwarranted suggestion is this; that if the catastrophe you hinted at—which Heaven forbid—shall actually have happened, if it were proved that my poor aunt had made an end of herself, I would not hesitate in the presence of her dead body to affirm that nothing in my uncle's behavionr towards her ever justified, excused, or even palliated such an act on her part. They have lived together very unhappily, it is true, but I am prepared if necessary to swear before that tribunal, with the notion of which you so terrified yonder girl" (for Jane had taken advantage of the discussion between the two young ladies to withdraw herself from Judith's neighbourhood) "that the fault lay more on my aunt's side than on her

husband's; he was rarely the first to begin a quarrel, and never the last to end it."

"Of course, you stick by Mr. Hulet," observed Judith; "that is not to be wondered at."

"Stick by him? It is very much to be wondered at that *you* who owe him months of kindly hospitality, and the material independence which you once told me would make you his debtor for life, do not 'stick by him,' as you call it, also. Nay, that you seem to find pleasure in imagining a catastrophe, which, if it has really happened, would fall on him of all men with the most crushing weight."

Beneath Evy's flashing eyes and scornful face, Judith's gaze for the first time since she had been her own mistress (for before that time it had been submissive and meek enough), sank slowly down until it rested on the gravel-walk on which they stood. "It

is no use our arguing this question, Evy, and far less our falling out together about it," answered she, doggedly. "I am grateful enough, I hope, to Mr. Hulet for all favours, but they cannot bribe me to forget facts."

"Since you value facts so highly then," replied Evy, with a contempt that she made no effort to conceal, "pray remember this one. It was only last night that my aunt observed—though I grant she spoke under great excitement—that she intended to live as long as she could if it was only to vex my uncle."

"I remember it quite well," owned Judith; "but in repeating her words you have omitted an important portion of them. She began by saying that she knew her husband wished her dead."

"That is true," replied Evy, "and very shocking to reflect upon, though, as I have said, she was scarcely mistress of herself at

the time in question. If any meaning is to be attached to that speech at all, however, it does away, you must needs admit, with all idea of suicide."

"Of suicide, yes; but it suggests something worse in place of it."

"Worse than suicide," echoed Evy, "what can you mean?"

"I mean nothing. I am speaking of what Mrs. Hulet's words meant, if they meant anything. She may reappear, as we both hope, to-day, or to-morrow, alive and well; but if she does not—if she is dead, and has not met with her death by accident, it must have been by design She has not committed suicide, you say. Then something else and worse must have happened. What is worse than suicide?"

"Murder!" gasped Evy, clinging to the garden-chair by which she stood.

"You have said it, and not I," said Judith, coldly. "Let us hope it is not so." And with that she walked away and joined the other searchers.

CHAPTER VII.

JUDITH AND HER BENEFACTOR.

NOTHING that had happened at Cliff Cottage, or, as it seemed, that could happen, no matter what evil Fate had in store for that dwelling, had affected Evy so painfully as Judith's conduct with respect to her patron and benefactor. When the day was done, and the cause of Mrs. Hulet's disappearance still remaining unrevealed, had necessarily given that circumstance a more serious complexion, Evy could scarcely think upon it, through thinking of Judith's look and words. That, in vulgar phrase,

there had been "no love lost" between her uncle and the girl to whom he had nevertheless been uniformly courteous, as well as generous beyond precedent, she was well aware, but that that serpent should have turned and bitten the hand that had caressed it at such a time as this was a thought so monstrous that it shut out all others. Hitherto, and even notwithstanding Judith's questionable conduct with respect to Captain Heyton, Evy had stood her friend, and tried to recommend her to the regard of others; but all that was over now. When once this unhappy mystery of her aunt's absence should have been explained, she made up her mind that Judith should no longer abuse Mr. Hulet's hospitality by remaining beneath that roof. The girl had ample means of her own to live upon—if her old patroness was dead, indeed, she would possess what might almost be called a fortune—so that she was no more to be

pitied as a poor dependent. The only person to be pitied was her Augustus, for what sort of wife would such a woman make? what meaning could she attach to such words as "love" and "honour," who, at a period of inexpressible anxiety and distress to her host, as a husband, had not only openly put the worst construction upon his wife's absence from his roof, but in her private ear had dropped the poison of suspicion that he himself had been its guilty cause? Perhaps even that much of reticence was owing to mere accident; had Jane chanced to have remained in their company Judith might have suggested that "something worse than suicide," even in her presence, to be repeated to gaping mouths that night in the servants' hall, and to pervade all Balcombe on the morrow. If such a rumour should reverberate back to her uncle's ears, Evy verily believed it would have killed him. Even as it was,

should it turn out that his wife was dead, and had come to her end by any means that might seem to reflect upon his conduct towards her, she felt that it would try him to the uttermost. She knew that, while affecting to despise the opinion of the world, how sensitive he was, and how he shrank even from its ridicule; how much more, then, would he shrink from its malevolence! If the reflection, that such a step would excite public derision, had restrained him from a second separation from his ill-chosen wife, how would it be with him in case an opportunity should be offered to ill-natured tongues to say that he had driven her to part from him, to seek death rather than dwell with him any longer? Even now he was evidently consumed by some miserable reflection, which might be the apprehension of that very thing. Within the twelve hours that had elapsed since his wife's disappearance he had already got to

look older by as many years. His pale face had blanched to the colour that comes upon man's cheek in extreme age, never to change for a more wholesome one; his limbs tottered as he moved with aimless steps from one room to another; his voice, which had been always clear and incisive, was become low and broken; only his eyes maintained their former brightness, and something more—they glittered like those of a fevered man, and turned hither and thither at every sound, in restless expectation of evil news.

For it was now become scarcely possible that any tidings respecting the missing woman could be aught but evil. It was the second day of her disappearance, and it had been made tolerably certain that she had never left the gates of Cliff Cottage. Her physical weakness was such that she could not have walked far, and no vehicle had picked her up on the road, nor had

any person met her. That she was not within the house, nor in any part of its grounds, was still more certain, and in the minds of all who dwelt therein the conviction was gathering strength with every hour that the mistress of Cliff Cottage was dead. Now who is it that kills and hides her victims—or does not hide them, just as the whim takes her capricious bosom—but the relentless sea? It was to the sea, then, that all eyes were turned, all footsteps bent, in search of the lost woman, and at last, on the shore, a mile or so to southward of the cottage, they found her corpse.

The body had evidently been in the water many hours, but there was no difficulty in its identification. It had been somewhat bruised by the action of the waves, but there were no other marks of violence about it whatever. The fact seemed evident enough that the unhappy lady had fallen off the cliff walk on that

fatal night at high water, and had drifted about in various currents along the beach to the place where the searchers discovered it.

It was Captain Heyton himself who was the first to bring the news up to the cottage to Evy, as she sat alone in the drawing-room, with her neglected work upon her knees, and her eyes gazing with thoughtful sorrow upon the little garden on which spring-time had fallen in all its beauty, but never to gladden the eye which had once so delighted in it; for the only thing in which her aunt had taken any lively pleasure was in her flowers.

"You have bad news, I see?" said Evy, rising, with frightened looks, as her lover entered.

"Yes, darling, it is bad news; yet scarcely worse than this suspense has been to us all. Mrs. Hulet has been found—but, alas! dead and drowned."

"Heaven help my uncle!" answered Evy.

"Yes, indeed. Every one feels for him. Even the foolish persons who have said such ill-natured things about him will be silenced now."

"Tell me about it, that is, if you can, Jack—if it is not too terrible."

"Nay, dearest; there was nothing terrible. The poor lady—don't cry, darling, though you may well be sorry for her—she was a good creature, and meant well, I do believe, towards everybody, and was very, very kind to us. Well, there was nothing painful about her looks. Her face is almost unchanged, and quite serene and placid. She must have fallen over yonder"—he pointed towards the cliff walk—"at the flood, in very deep water. At all events, the poor soul struck against nothing; it must have been over in an instant."

"But how could it have happened?"

"Easily enough, of course. It was very nearly happening once before, you know, and I think Hulet was wrong in not having the wall——"

"Hush, for heaven's sake!" exclaimed Evy, suddenly. "My uncle is coming."

The next moment there was a noise as though somebody was fumbling at the handle of the door; then the door was pushed open slowly, and with effort, as when a young child pushes it, and in came Mr. Hulet. He looked like a man who has not slept for many a night.

"How are you, Heyton? You have news, I see. What is it?" He tottered into a chair, and put one hand before his eyes, stretching the other out as if for silence. "One moment," he murmured. "Go on now; I am ready to hear you. You need not tell me she is dead. How, and where, did you find her?"

Jack told the story of the discovery of the body as feelingly, yet concisely, as he could, to which the other listened without a word. Then, when all was finished, "How was my poor wife dressed?"

"In her evening apparel, sir; it must have been as we apprehended. She must have gone downstairs, and out upon the cliff walk again alone. There is one article only missing—a shoe—which probably was dropped when she fell. I am sorry to pain you so, sir."

Mr. Hulet was weeping bitterly, and the unwonted sight—for a man's rare tears melt men's hearts to witness—quite overcame tender-hearted Jack.

"I am sure," added he, with a blundering attempt at consolation, that made him shiver directly he had uttered it, "that you have nothing to reproach yourself with."

"Ah, but I have," groaned the widower.

Some reflection seemed to be touching his very heart-strings as he cried out, "Oh, I would to heaven it were not so!" He sat silent for a moment with hidden face, then added, "Oh, Evy, what a day before death your poor aunt had! How soiled with ignoble thoughts and vulgar passion—and it was my fault, my fault!"

He looked round the room that had been the scene of their quarrel on that fatal night, and shuddered.

"Oh Evy, darling Evy," said he, suddenly, "it is too late for me to make amends; but at least let me afford a warning to others. There is no fear of you and Jack falling into so sad an error, I know, but there is Judith—Sophia was fond of the girl at one time, and I would fain see her happy; let her take a lesson from my fate. Tell her—tell her from me—to avoid sharp words and bitter thoughts, lest some day she may speak and think them upon

the threshold of the undreamt-of grave. Nay, lest she herself may perish as poor Sophia did. From here, from this very chamber—think of it—she passed in a moment, with anger against me in her heart, and scorn upon her tongue, into the presence of the All-Wise and the All-Just. May He have mercy on her, and make allowance for her, though I made none. Fifty years ago, Evy—it seems an age to you, it seems a day to me—that woman was as young and beautiful as yourself. I loved her, heaven knows it, as dearly as Heyton yonder loves you. Yes," continued he, with an absent air, "I must have done so, since the bare remembrance of it, notwithstanding all that had happened to destroy the illusion, caused me to take her once more to my hearth and home. This hearth, this home, that might have been so happy, that are now made so desolate, so wretched. She is coming. I hear the

steps of those who are bringing her to my door."

There was a muffled tread without, and presently a shuffling of feet upon the stairs, such as is caused by those who carry some heavy burden. To these dreadful sounds all listened in silence, till the door was opened, and in came Judith, looking very grave and calm.

"Have they laid her in her room, Judith?" asked Mr. Hulet, in a low gentle voice.

"Yes, sir. I have seen that done," returned she, in a tone of unmistakable reproach.

"It is well, and I thank you for it. Do not look at Evy as if she were to blame for being absent. I kept her here with me. It was my place to have been there; I know it; but I had not the courage. Judith, you and I have not been the good friends I could have wished. For the sake

of her who is lying dead yonder, let this be amended; she loved you much at one time, and she has left proofs of it behind her. Take my hand."

Judith hesitated a moment, then, with a hurried look towards Captain Heyton, placed her hand in Mr. Hulet's, and suffered him to press it, but without response. "Henceforth," said he, "let us be a united family. There will be a welcome, Judith, under my roof for the man that you shall make your husband, though it will not be here." And once more he looked round the room with shuddering horror. Judith answered nothing, but stood with downcast eyes and a flushed face, and one foot beating softly on the ground.

"If you will permit me, uncle," said Evy during an embarrassing pause, "I would like to go upstairs, and say—and take——" Here she broke down into a pitiful sob.

"Say farewell to your poor aunt," said Mr. Hulet, finishing the half-formed sentence. "Do so, dear Evy; and kiss her cold cheek for me. Heyton will go with you." When the young couple had left the room, he turned once more to Judith, whose hand he still retained. "He has begun early his task of comfort, has he not? Let us trust he will continue it to his life's end. If anything could make this terrible time endurable to me, Judith, it is the thought that they, at least, will be happy. I was just bidding them take warning by what has happened, to be gentle and forbearing to one another. I give the same advice to you in all kindness."

Judith quietly but firmly disengaged her hand from Mr. Hulet's hold. "Thank you," said she, coldly; "I trust my husband will not be always quarrelling without cause with *me*."

"I trust not, indeed, Judith," answered the old man, softly. "Nothing you can say can equal the bitterness of my own contrition, yet I am sorry that you reproach me. I fear it shows that you cherish ill-will against me, though I know not how I have offended you."

"I have nothing to forgive upon my own account," said Judith slowly; "and nothing more, Mr. Hulet, to say—just now." And she moved slowly towards the door. There was a curious sort of menace in her air, though he did not notice that, but only the studied coolness, not to say hostility, of her tone.

"I had thought," said Mr. Hulet, with a slight flush, "that nothing—nothing could have added to the wretchedness of this hour; but this behaviour of yours, Judith, does give me still another pang. I do not think I have earned it at your hands. You say you have nothing to for-

give. Is it upon my poor wife's account you scorn me so ?"

She turned round upon him with a stern and searching glance. "It is."

"It may be so," answered Mr. Hulet, humbly, "and in that case I do not blame you. I have behaved ill towards your friend and benefactress. I have been very much in the wrong. Still, Judith, if she herself yonder could speak, she would surely say, 'Forgive him for my sake.' Your manner compels me to believe that my home will not be yours in future"—she shook her head with a contemptuous smile—"so be it; but let us be friends for the little while that we must needs remain under the same roof. To appear otherwise would just now be most unseemly. Why do you smile, Judith, a smile more cruel than your frown ?"

"Did I smile ?" answered she, stopping, but still keeping her eyes upon the ground.

"I did not know I smiled. Is there anything more you wish to say to me, Mr. Hulet?"

"Nothing, Judith; only once more to express my hope that until you are free to leave us, you will refrain in this house that has already, alas, witnessed so much of domestic discord—I entreat you, I say, until, at least, my poor wife is buried——"

"Buried!" echoed Judith, turning round upon him, with her hand upon the door. "There is something to happen before burial, I conclude."

"I do not understand you, Judith. What is to happen?"

"The inquest."

Each looked into one another's eyes; the girl with a fierce glance of hate and menace, the old man with a crowd of emotions—surprise, dismay, despair, pursuing one another over his pale furrowed face, their rear brought up by a certain conscious dignity which effaced the rest.

"I understand you less than ever now, Judith. What is the inquest to do with me that you dare to look like that?"

There was no answer, save the same cold, contemptuous smile she had given him before, and the next instant she had left the room, and closed the door behind her. Mr. Hulet made as though he would have followed her, but his trembling limbs refused their office, and he fell rather than dropped into his chair.

"What does she mean?" he cried. "What *can* she mean? Oh God, is it that I am not even yet sufficiently punished, but that Thou art about to desert me altogether?"

CHAPTER VIII.

AT "THE DOG AND DUCK."

DEATH is a guest of himself sombre and sad enough, and casts a gloom, such as belongs to no other visitant of human households. The very air is made stiller by his awful presence, and through it every sound comes to the ear with such unnatural distinctness as seems discord. So dread, and so indisputably by right divine, is his majesty that he who is clothed with it, although the humblest, exacts respect and deference from his lord; nay, for the time being, while he lies so stiff and strange

within the house about which perhaps but yesterday he moved like others, the servant becomes master. The soul has fled, as we believe; the mind is no longer there, or has become unconscious, and yet we pay a homage to the cold flesh which when alive and warm it never had. The song is forbidden, the laughter hushed, even on the lips of children who know not what death means. A guest, ungracious, sombre, unwelcome at all times, and when arriving unexpectedly most dread and sad. How much more, then, when coming we know not how, yet needs must tell; and when in the house of mourning intrudes the unsympathizing, irresistible arm of the Law. Your wife, your child, your friend is lying dead; but not to rest in peace till earth receives him; nor shall you weep in peace, but come forth amid the gaping crowd, and answer how he died. This is a terror added to death indeed.

On the morning after the finding of Mrs. Hulet's body, it was removed to a small inn between the cottage and Balcombe, to await the inquest, which took place on the same afternoon. It was a roadside house much frequented by wayfarers of all kinds, but it had never been so thronged—"not even during the steeple-chases" it was observed —as on this occasion.

The crowd indeed were kept out of the house as much as could be, but in the road in front they clustered like bees, and from underneath the windows of the room where the body had been placed, sent up a hum as from a hive. The whole proceedings were dreadfully out of consonance with the occasion, and though it mattered nothing to her who was the cause of it all, seemed especially so in her case. For the poor lady's life had been, through ill-health and fastidiousness, one of seclusion, and at all events it was certain she had never in her

lifetime set foot in a public-house. Whether the drawing-room at Cliff Cottage, which, small as it was, was the largest room in the house, had not sufficient accommodation for the coroner's jury, or whether it is enacted by the wisdom of Parliament—strongly influenced as it is known to be by the publican interest—that all coroners' quests shall be held in a public-house, I know not; but at all events, at the Dog and Duck this particular inquest was held.

In the morning Evy had seen her uncle, and found him much more calm and collected than his behaviour on the previous day had led her to expect; but Judith he had declined to see.

"Tell your uncle," said she to Evy, when the latter was about to enter Mr. Hulet's study, "that I wish to answer a question that he put to me last night." And Evy of course delivered the message.

"No," said Mr. Hulet, quietly; "I will not see Judith. She used such words to me last night as I cannot call to mind without their evoking feelings such as I could not entertain to-day of all days. I have forgiven her, I hope, but I will not give her the opportunity of so offending again—at least not now."

And Evy made no attempt to alter this resolution; in her heart, indeed, she applauded it, and felt much less delicacy than forty-eight hours ago she would have thought it possible for her to feel, in acquainting Judith with his decision.

Judith, however, took it very coolly. "I am sorry," said she, "for your uncle's sake, not mine. The question he wished me to answer, and which I am now prepared to answer, was one of importance to him. If his ideas should change upon this matter he may come to me if he pleases. I shall move no more in it; and, besides, I

am very far from well to-day, and shall not leave my room."

"But we have received notice, Judith, to attend and give evidence before the coroner."

"Yes, you see it has come to that, as I told you it would," replied Judith, with a triumphant air. "But as to my attendance, that will depend upon circumstances—that is, of course, upon how I feel; at present it is my intention not to attend."

Evy could not understand her behaviour, except so far that it was obviously meant to be disagreeable; but she was sincerely pleased to find that Judith was not going to the inquest. She had taken such an aversion to her, by reason of her late conduct, that she almost believed her capable of saying something on such an occasion with the intention of giving her uncle pain. The change in her tone and manner had been considerable, and apparent even to the charitable Evy,

so soon as her independence had been assured by Mr. Hulet's liberality, but now, probably because she had become comparatively rich through his wife's demise, her air had an assumption of superiority that was intolerable. Nor was this the worse; there was malice in it, and triumphant malice; symptoms of the possession of that devil, the desire to do evil, which made Evy tremble with vague alarms. She did not think it necessary to inform Mr. Hulet of the cavalier reception which Judith had given to his refusal to see her, nor did he put any question concerning her until the time arrived for attending the inquest.

Then "Is not Judith coming with us?" inquired he.

"I believe not, uncle. She is not well, and does not feel equal to it."

"I am sorry," returned he, "though I can hardly be surprised. It is a pity, though, that you will have to go through

this ordeal unsupported by one of your own sex."

"I do not want one, uncle. It is enough that you are with me," said Evy, simply.

His only reply was a silent pressure of her hand. The public-house was but a few hundred yards along the highway, and they went thither on foot, which, had they been aware of the crowd, they perhaps would not have done; but so soon as they appeared, the people made a lane for their approach, up which, with quiet gravity, the old man walked with his companion. At the door was Captain Heyton, hat in hand, and in a little room that had been set apart for them were good Mrs. Hodlin Barmby and Mrs Storks.

"We thought you would like to have old friends about you, darling, whispered the former; and, indeed, notwithstanding what she had said to her uncle, it was a great comfort to Evy to find them there,

more especially when he was summoned from her to attend the jury, who sat in an upper chamber. By reason of his manifest weakness he was here accommodated with a chair, and though one or two of the jurymen regarded him with some severity, great commiseration was shown for him by the majority of his interlocutors.

His evidence, which was in strict accordance with the facts, so far as we have at present been made acquainted with them, was given in quiet and collected tones, though he evinced deep emotion. The last time he had been in company with the deceased alive was in the drawing-room, from which he had parted from her about midnight; he had, however, seen her afterwards from his window walking with Judith Mercer, her adopted daughter, upon the cliff walk. He had been wakeful that night, and heard both his wife and the young lady in question retire to their re-

spective rooms; but he had heard nothing more, no movement of any one about the house, until the morning, when at breakfast time he was informed that Mrs. Hulet was missing. This was in brief the substance of his testimony, though it of course went into detail.

By the coronor: "Was it the custom of yourself and your deceased wife, Mr. Hulet, to occupy separate sleeping apartments?"

"It was."

"That is queer," observed a juror.

"You were both invalids, I believe," continued the coronor, casting an indignant glance at the author of this interruption, "and I suppose being restless you interfered with each other's slumbers."

"It was partly from that reason, but also, I regret to say, because we were not upon very good terms with one another," answered Mr. Hulet, quietly.

The juror nodded, and looked about him with a triumphant air. Here was something important, which but for his supernatural sagacity would not have transpired.

"There was no especial disagreement between your wife and you, however, upon the evening in question, Mr. Hulet?" continued the coronor, who, jealous of interference with his authority, and of his own reputation for astuteness, resented this victory of private intelligence.

"Indeed, sir," answered Mr. Hulet with bowed head, "I am afraid there was. The quarrel indeed was about nothing, or what most persons would consider nothing, a family picture; but we both lost our tempers. Each was probably in the wrong, but to me, after what has happened since, it seems as though I alone was to blame."

"Did you menace her in any way?" inquired the hostile juror.

"I must insist, sir," observed the coroner, angrily, "on having these inquiries put through the proper channel, that is, through me. If every one were to ask questions just as he pleases, this court would become a bear garden."

"Put that question, then," said the juryman, who, though so laudably solicitous to perform his novel duties, was by no means certain about his rights; and the coroner put it accordingly.

"I never menaced my poor wife, thank heaven, in all my life," answered Mr. Hulet, solemnly, "nor ever wished her harm. Though it is true I may have said that I wished we were separated."

"Ay, ay, that is very different from a menace," said the coroner, consolingly, who was himself a married man. "You have then no reason to suppose that from anger, melancholy, or any other cause, that your deceased wife could have been induced to put an end to herself?"

"God forbid," answered Mr. Hulet. "I am quite certain from my knowledge of her character that no such idea ever entered into her mind. Had she chosen to do so she could have parted from me at any time."

"As in point of fact she did at an earlier period of your married life, I believe?" continued the coroner, for their story so far was well known.

Mr. Hulet bowed assent. He could scarcely trust himself to speak about that far back time.

"Really, gentlemen," said the coroner, "no other question occurs to me with which we need trouble the witness, and this scene must necessarily be very painful to him. Has any juror——"

"Yes, I have," interrupted the irrepressible one, who had been burning for this opportunity of distinguishing himself. "The deceased had been warned, you tell

us, Mr. Hulet, not to venture alone on the cliff walk, the wall of which we have examined, and are unanimously of opinion that it is too low for safety. How then do you account for her returning to it by starlight, for that is the supposition, and incurring what she must have known to be great danger ?"

"I cannot account for it at all," said Mr. Hulet, simply.

"It is very easy to see that our friend is a bachelor," remarked the coroner, significantly.

At which the rest of the jury smiled, and the Irresistible grew very red in the face, and cleared his throat as the sailor clears the decks for action.

"Permit me to remark, Mr. Coroner," exclaimed he, "that your remark is most indecent."

Here the rest of the jury tittered, and the Irrepressible grew redder and redder.

"It appears to me," he continued, "that the person who ought to be the judge, or at all events, the president of this court, is more inclined to be the advocate of the prisoner——"

"The *what?*" ejaculated the coroner, springing to his feet with indignation.

"I didn't mean it, upon my life and soul I didn't mean it," exclaimed the Irrepressible, humbly. "I meant the witness, of course, not the prisoner."

"You said 'the prisoner,' sir," remarked the coroner, solemnly. "You have just now most improperly applied the word 'indecent' to my conduct, but even such a term does not express your most uncalled-for and abominable——"

"But I didn't mean it, sir," moaned the unhappy juror, "the word slipped out."

"I will thank you not to interrupt me in the performance of my judicial functions," was the coroner's sharp reply. "The word

slipped out, sir, as the cat slips out of the bag, I fear, and shows us your animus in this case. It is most disgraceful to one in your position to have an animus, sir, and it will be my duty, in case it appears again, to forward an account of it to—hem—the proper authorities."

The Irrepressible was crushed; visions culled from his early historical studies of a secretary of state catching him by the collar, and handing him up through the Traitor's Gate into the custody of the governor of the Tower, filled his guilty mind. For the future he resolved to retire into that obscurity from which he regretted he had ever emerged, and to coincide with any verdict the coroner might direct, even though it should be justifiable homicide. The coroner, on the other hand, smarting under an implication which he felt was not altogether undeserved, determined to hold the reins of inquiry with a more equal

hand, and to show less tenderness for "family feelings" than he had hitherto evinced.

The widower's examination having been concluded, he was dismissed, and Evy summoned. She was a little fluttered by the horror and strangeness of the circumstances, as she well might be, but she told what she had to tell with quiet clearness, and answered even the questions that were put to her concerning the disagreements between Mr. Hulet and the deceased without any distressing sign of the anguish they cost her. It was an immense relief to her that Judith was not present, or as she supposed, about to be so; she had no fear that anything would transpire to the disadvantage of her uncle except from that source. She believed him from the bottom of her heart to be wholly innocent of having driven his unhappy wife to her death, and, moreover, was well convinced that she had

not sought it designedly. But for the dark insinuations of Judith, indeed, so terrible an idea as was suggested by these questions would never have entered her mind. On the other hand, she had no explanation of the unfortunate event to offer. It was highly improbable that Mrs. Hulet should have thought of venturing on the cliff walk after midnight; but still she had been walking there with Judith until very late, and the night being sultry, and finding herself disinclined for sleep, it was just possible that the whim might have taken her to go thither again. At all events, that solution of the mystery, however unsatisfactory, was the best that she could give. She could not say that, to her knowledge, Mrs. Hulet had ever walked in her sleep, though she would have given much to have been able to say so. The poor lady had not been addicted to pedestrian exercise, even when she was awake. To the question,

Was egress from the cottage to the garden easy at so late an hour? she had answered yes. The shutters of the drawing-room were rarely fastened, and on warm nights, such as the one in question, the window itself was sometimes left open.

"After all," said the coroner, when her examination was concluded, without much elucidation of the matter in hand, and the jury were rubbing their chins, and looking more puzzled than ever, "we have not yet seen what I may call the principal witness, gentlemen. This young lady, I am sure, has given every information that lies in her power, but she was not the last person who was in the poor lady's company. I will now call Miss Judith Mercer."

Hearing this, just as she was about to leave the room, Evy, moved by some impulse she could not explain, turned round and said,

"I am afraid, sir, Miss Mercer will not

be here to-day; at least, I left her very far from well in her own room."

"I am sorry for that, Miss Carthew; but it is absolutely necessary—what do you say, gentlemen? Yes, absolutely necessary that we should have her evidence before us. She must be sent for, if you please, unless you can produce a medical certificate; and even then we must go to her. In the meanwhile, gentlemen, we can fill up the time by an examination of the servants; Mrs. Hulet's maid, and so on."

Evy bowed and left the room with a firm step, but her heart sank within her. A presentiment of evil in connection with Judith's evidence had oppressed her from the first, and now, it seemed, after a delusive hope that the blow had been averted—which only made it the more stunning—this was about to be realized. To her great relief, however, Mr. Hulet did not appear to share her fears.

"Let Judith be sent for at once," said he, quietly, "if it be necessary;" which accordingly was done. And while they waited for her he sat with his hand in Evy's, softly patting it, and calling her a brave girl. "Next to myself, my darling, I know you have suffered worse than any of us during this sad time—a time, too, that was to have been so bright and joyous for you" (alluding, of course, to the drawing near of her marriage-day). "Well, well, for you, thank heaven, there is sunshine in store yet."

"And for you, uncle, too, I trust; with me—with us;" and she looked lovingly towards Jack, by whom she had been unselfishly consigned to Mr. Hulet for the day, to comfort him, but who could not help gazing greedily at her from afar.

The old man shook his head with a grave smile, but not a despairing one. If he did not see a restful future for himself in the

home that these young people should choose, it was only, perhaps, because at such a time he thought it wrong to look for it. He certainly looked better, calmer, more himself, than she could have hoped to see him. Presently the messenger that had been despatched to the cottage came back with a note for Mr. Hulet, addressed in Judith's hand.

"What can this mean?" said he, in an agitated voice, and with a little flush on his pale cheek. "She says she will not come unless she sees me first."

Then Evy called to mind Judith's strange words that morning, "I am sorry for your uncle's sake, not mine;" and what, thought she, could that question of his have been which she was now prepared to answer, and which she said was of such importance to him? She felt sick at heart with fear.

"Judith is not well, uncle, and seems much put out to-day; do not be vexed with

her, nor anger her if it can be helped. If she says she will not come unless she sees you, I am afraid she will keep her word."

"Very good, then I will go to her," said Mr. Hulet, meekly taking up his hat. His submission touched her, for it seemed to Evy to be owing not to any fear of Judith, nor to the suspicion of any malice on her part, but simply because he was resolved from henceforth to have no disagreement nor ill-feeling with any one.

"Shall I come with you, uncle?" asked Evy doubtfully; she could not decide whether it would be better for her to do so, or not; she wished to be by her uncle's side in case Judith should attack him, and on the other hand, any cruel word that might be spoken to him, would necessarily be made more painful by her presence.

"No, no, my darling," answered Mr. Hulet; "do you stay here with your good

friends; I shall be back with Judith in a few minutes."

But the few minutes extended to half an hour, and even more, before Judith made her appearance, and to Evy's great surprise she came alone.

"Is not my uncle with you?" inquired Evy, with some anxiety. "He said he should bring you back."

"Yes; but he is not quite well; the heat of this room, he said, was a little too much for him; nay," continued Judith, earnestly laying her hand on Evy's arm as the latter rose to hurry home, "he anticipated your desire to come to him, and bade me tell you not to do so; he particularly wishes to be left to himself for a little."

Evy looked up inquiringly in Judith's face, for the first time suspecting her of having told a deliberate falsehood; but she could read nothing there to corroborate such a suspicion. It still wore that un-

pleasant expression of triumph, however, which she had noticed in it once before that day, and something, she scarce knew what, prompted her to make appeal to her woman's heart at a moment which she felt to be a crisis.

"The servants have all been examined, and the jury are waiting for you, dear Judith," whispered she hurriedly; "from some expressions you dropped yesterday, I fear you have suffered your mind to form an uncharitable judgment upon my poor uncle in this sad matter. Of course, I do not wish to interfere with the testimony which you are about to give, so far as facts are concerned; but I do beseech you not to give them an unwarrantable colour that may darken his declining days. If you will not spare him for his own sake, let anything I have ever done for you or striven to do, plead for him, for mine——"

"Miss Judith Mercer," exclaimed the

officer of the court, putting his head in at the door, "I am bidden to say the coroner is waiting for you."

"I am ready," cried Judith rising from her chair at once. "Evy Carthew," whispered she in her grave tones, "I came here to do my duty; if I fail in it, or do less than it, remember it will be, as you say, for your sake and not for his."

The next moment she was gone.

Evy listened to her light footfall as it fell on the uncarpeted stairs without, with mingled emotions. If she had persuaded Judith to refrain from any malevolent suggestions respecting Mrs. Hulet's death, she had done well; but if, on the other hand, Judith had had no intention of making them, had not she herself by her interference seemed to admit that the suspicion of suicide was by no means so monstrous and untenable as she had affirmed?

"What is the matter with Miss Mercer, I wonder?" observed Mrs. Hodlin Barmby to Mrs. Storks, it must be confessed with no very great sympathy of tone.

"I don't know I'm sure," returned that lady, "but to judge by her looks as she left us to give evidence, I should say she would like to get a verdict of Wilful Murder against us all."

"All but one," whispered Mrs. Barmby, significantly.

"Yes, that is very true," answered the other in the same low tone. "This sad affair is in my opinion the more to be regretted since it postpones Evy's marriage, and exposes that young fellow to Judith's machinations."

"Nay, but the captain is true as steel," said Mrs. Barmby, regarding him with a well-pleased smile, as he leant over Evy's chair, and whispered comfort in her ear.

"Yes, but these men are so very, very weak," replied the widow, pityingly. "At all events, I shall be glad when those two are married."

CHAPTER IX.

AFTER THE VERDICT.

HILE Jack and Evy were still whispering together — not because what they spoke were words of love, but because the gravity and sadness of the occasion made all voices low —the officer of the court reappeared, and once more summoned the latter. "The coroner and jury wish to see you again, miss." Evy turned deadly pale; was she then about to be confronted with Judith, and compelled to listen to some exaggerated and malicious statements which she would

have to deny point blank respecting her unhappy uncle!

"They won't keep you over a minute, bless you," added the official good-naturedly, who set down her change of colour merely to the natural repugnance of the young lady to repeat an ordeal which she had flattered herself was concluded; "they never do when a party is recalled."

A little comforted by this assurance, Evy reascended to the jury-room; where she found Judith standing by the long table, so beautiful, calm, and collected, that the recollection involuntarily occurred to her of a picture she had once beheld of Charlotte Corday before her judges. She did not so much as turn her head or glance towards Evy as she entered.

"We have troubled you to reappear before us, Miss Carthew," said the coroner, "to reconcile what appears to be a slight discrepancy between your evidence and

that of this other young lady. You told us that after you had retired to your room you heard the voices of your uncle and the deceased in altercation; now please to tell us what you heard after that."

"I heard my uncle go to his room, and afterwards—when their walk in the garden was ended—my aunt and Miss Mercer also retired."

"Just so; and nothing more?"

"No," said she; then colouring very much in spite of herself she added, "or rather, perhaps, I should say I did fancy I heard my uncle leave his room, though that turned out to be a mistake, for upon asking him at breakfast time whether it had been so, he assured me I was in error."

"The error was at all events shared by this young lady," observed the coroner, dryly. "I can easily imagine you deemed it of no consequence, but in an inquiry of this kind there should be nothing,

however apparently unimportant, left untold."

This was apparently all that was wanted of poor Evy, and she once more sought the wretched room, where Jack and those two faithful ladies still remained, without whose presence she would, indeed, have felt forlorn. The presentiment of coming evil was growing more distinct, yet darker, with every moment.

"You are looking very ill, dear Evy," said Mrs. Barmby, tenderly; "this dreadful day has been too much for you; let Captain Heyton escort you home, and Mrs. Storks and I will wait for Judith."

But Evy shook her head. She would herself wait for Judith; and above all she would wait lest she should be wanted again in the jury-room. The fear of what might come of those deliberations above stairs had assumed such proportions that she had made up her mind, should circumstances

seem to demand it, to speak out, and let the jury know that if in herself they had had a witness anxious to extenuate—though the omission of her late and supplemental piece of evidence had, indeed been purely accidental—they had in Judith Mercer one at least as prone to malice and exaggeration and a personal enemy of her unhappy uncle. However, she was not again sent for, and presently Judith came down with a grave and quiet face.

"They have kept you a long time, Miss Mercer," said Jack, with sympathy. He had a general notion "that all the women," with the exception of Evy, "were rather hard upon that girl," and was the more gracious to her accordingly. "I am afraid, by your looks, that they have been bothering you."

"You are very kind to concern yourself on my poor account, Captain Heyton," returned Judith, with a smile which some-

how contrived to express, not only gratitude, but the sense that nobody but himself had any interest in her. "I have really, however, nothing to complain of. Being no relation to poor Mrs. Hulet, but merely, as it were, a dependent, the jury were naturally not so careful to spare my feelings as in the case of members of the family. It was rather trying——"

"There can be no sort of doubt about the verdict, of course?" observed Mrs. Storks, cutting Judith short. She had "no patience with that designing girl," nor the faintest belief in the genuineness of her humility.

"Indeed, madam, I trust not," replied Judith. "I have, at all events, done my very best to contradict the foolish and mischievous gossip that has been so long afloat concerning the terms upon which Mr. Hulet lived with his late wife, and the

effects of which can alone cause us apprehension."

This was a sharp stroke, for Mrs. General Storks had herself a somewhat unruly tongue, and, having ridiculed Mr. Hulet's reunion with his "Sophia," had afterwards pointed to the result with a natural triumph.

Whether there was a doubt about what the verdict might be or not, the interest felt in it was sufficient to keep the whole party in their present uncomfortable quarters until it should be divulged, which, however, happened within half an hour. So soon as there was a movement implying departure above stairs, the captain went up, and brought back the looked-for news.

The verdict was one of Accidental Death, accompanied by a "rider" to the effect that, in the opinion of the jury, the wall of the cliff walk, over which the unfortunate lady was supposed to have fallen, was danger-

ously low. A great weight seemed to be lifted off Evy's mind when she heard this result of their deliberations, which she was most anxious at once to communicate to Mr. Hulet. She had little doubt that it was to the suspense and worry consequent on so distressing an inquiry that the indisposition of which Judith had spoken was due, and now she would be the physician to heal him with this news. She took a hurried leave of her good friends from Lucullus Mansion, and then started with Jack and Judith for the cottage. To the latter she felt that she owed some reparation for the suspicions in which she had indulged concerning her, and yet somehow she shrank from making any advances towards her in the way of friendship. Judith, on the contrary, was even more patronizingly affectionate in her tone than usual, and called the captain's attention to the noble manner in which "their dear Evy"

had "borne up" throughout that trying day. Evy did not feel herself equal to conversation upon any topic, so that Judith had it all to herself, and during their short walk contrived to be humble, sympathetic, helpful, and patronizing by turns. Her beauty, whose blemish, if it had one, lay in a certain lack of refinement, seemed to have become mellowed and toned down, as it were, by the distress she had herself endured, until it was well-nigh perfection. The contrast between her and Evy, who hung her head, and looked a little wan and pale, was that of a rose to a lily.

Arrived at home, Evy left her companions in the drawing-room, and, not finding Mr. Hulet in the study, went up to his own room. To her first knock at the door there was no reply; to her second, a voice, so dejected, so hopeless, as it seemed, of all good tidings, answered it, that she scarcely recognized it for her uncle's.

"Who is there?" asked he.

"It is I, uncle; Evy. I have something to tell you."

She purposely made her tone as cheerful as she could, that he might guess her errand. Then in the hush of that death-stricken house, she could hear him sigh, and wearily rise, and come across the room to unlock the door.

"I hope I am not wrong to disturb you, dear uncle," faltered she, amazed and pained to see how changed his face had grown from what it had been but a few hours before, for then, though it had been sad and grave enough, it was calm and steadfast—the countenance of one who had made up his mind for sorrow, as a porter shapes his back to his burden—but now it was wild, and haggard, and despairing beyond the power of words to paint.

"Come in, Evy; sit down," said he, in a hollow voice, himself sinking as he spoke

into a chair. Then, hiding his mouth, which she had noticed was working in the strangest manner, with his hand, he gazed out on the sparkling sea.

"I came to say that the verdict has been given, uncle."

"Ay, ay," said he, in such an abstracted tone, that she could scarce believe he heard her. "Very true. The verdict."

"Good heavens!" thought she, "has he been driven mad by misery, that he should be so unmoved on such a topic! What subject can possibly engross his mind to the exclusion of this one?"

"Dear uncle," cried she, falling on her knees before him, "what is the matter—I mean, besides what I know of? There is something. I feel sure."

"No," replied he, starting, and looking at her with an anxious face. "There is nothing else. Is there not enough in to-day's work to make one sad and thoughtful?"

"Indeed there is, dear uncle, but I had hoped that Heaven had given you strength to bear it better. The trial is passing, dear. Don't you remember those lines poor aunt was so fond of?

> "'The shadow on the dial
> Shows the passing of the trial,
> Proves the presence of the sun.'

This wretchedness cannot endure for ever."

Mr. Hulet shuddered, and shook his head. "For ever, for ever," he murmured.

"Nay, nay, dear uncle; it seems so to-day, but it will not seem so to-morrow, or, at least," she added, hastily, suddenly remembering that the funeral was fixed for the next day, "in a little time. To-day is the worst day, and the worst is over. The verdict, I came to tell you, is accidental death."

"Accidental death," echoed he, slowly.

"Yes, I thought that was what it would be."

Her words of comfort, as she had expected them to be, had fallen on almost heedless ears. Her uncle had doubtless expected such a verdict, but still it might easily have been an open one such as Found Drowned, which would have given occasion for unpleasant gossip, or, at all events, would not have put a decisive end to the affair, as had now been done. It was certainly a matter for comfort and satisfaction, if not for content, and yet he had shown none.

To Evy this indifference, so uncharacteristic of her sensitive and unsanguine relative, seemed a very bad sign. She would rather have seen him showing weakness in the other direction, shedding tears of grateful joy. Had this been the case, she would not have informed him of the "rider" that the jury had appended to

their decision, but as it was she resolved to do so."

"The verdict was not only what I have said, uncle; it had an addition to it."

"Indeed," answered he, with some appearance of interest. "What was it?"

"Well, the jury expressed their opinion that the cliff walk was a dangerous spot, and that the wall requires heightening."

Now there was nothing, as Evy was well aware, that Mr. Hulet's nature resented so much as other people's interference with his affairs. A week ago he would certainly have gone into something very like a passion, had any alteration in his premises been suggested to him, especially one which, as this did, implied a want of judgment or prudence on his own part. If he had any "kick" in him left at all, he would, thought she, have manifested it on the present occasion. On the other hand, if he had really thought that the jury were justified in their

representation—if he deemed his wife had come to harm through any negligence of his—it was only natural that he should display emotion of another kind. As it was, he displayed none whatever.

"Ay, the wall is low," was all he said. Then added after a little pause, and with a stealthy side glance at Evy, "The next tenant will have to see to that."

"You have made up your mind to leave the cottage, then, dear uncle?"

"Yes, child, yes. We must do that." His voice was pitiful and tender, as though she really were a child whom he thus addressed, and his eyes were suddenly filled with tears.

"Yes, we must leave this," he continued; "don't ask me about it yet—not to-day, nor to-morrow, Evy."

"Indeed, uncle, I will not do so; the subject must needs be a very painful one. But don't shut yourself up here alone, dear

uncle, and refuse what comfort we can give you. Jack wants to see you, just to shake your hand, you know; we all feel so thankful, for your sake, that to-day's sad business is over."

"Jack," said the old man, in a hoarse whisper; "is Jack—I mean is Captain Heyton here?"

"Yes, uncle, he is below in the drawing-room with Judith."

"Then go, darling," exclaimed Mr. Hulet, with eager fervour. "Go down, Evy, go down."

"Nay, but he can wait, and I can wait," said Evy, softly; "my first duty is here, uncle, by your side."

"Don't say that, Evy, oh don't say that," faltered the old man. "It is too much," and covering his face with his hands, he suddenly burst into tears.

Evy waited for the paroxysm, for such it was, to abate, then stealing her arm round

his bowed head, and kissing him fondly, she strove to comfort him.

"You are unnerved and shaken, dear uncle——"

"Broken, broken," he sobbed out, "a broken man."

"Nay, you must not say that; and besides, you have two loving props to lean on, dear. You must let them do their office, uncle—which will be a pleasure and a duty to both—and to begin at once, you must not remain up here alone with your sorrow; or else you must let Jack come up——"

"Jack, Jack," cried the old man, putting his hand to his forehead, "what was that you said about Jack just now?"

"He is waiting below with Judith to see you——"

"Then, I tell you, go down," interrupted the old man, in hushed but vehement tones. "I cannot see him, nor talk to you any

more just now. I am not equal to it; but go you down."

He raised her from the ground, for she was still kneeling, and with more strength than she could have believed him capable of exerting, hurried her towards the door. The excitement and apprehension in his face were most alarming.

"You will not lock yourself in again, uncle?" pleaded she.

"Yes, yes; I must, I must, in case she comes."

"Who comes?" asked Evy, not without a terrible suspicion that her uncle's brain had given way, and that he imagined himself haunted by his dead wife.

"Why Judith, of course, child. Hush." Here his voice sank to a terrified whisper. "Beware of her, and do not leave them together. Go down, go down." And with those warning words he pushed her from the room, and locked the door behind her.

CHAPTER X.

RUIN.

VY did not at once descend into the drawing-room, notwithstanding her uncle's earnest recommendation to her so to do. On the contrary, it had the effect of sending her to her own chamber, to think for a little, in private, over the new misfortune that seemed to have fallen upon the ill-fated household. For was it possible that such words as those, "Go down; do not leave them together," uttered as they were, too, in such a tone of serious and eager warning, could have emanated from a sane mind? On re-

view, indeed, of the old man's conduct in other respects during their late interview, they were hardly explicable on any other ground than temporary insanity. The marvellous change that had been wrought in his appearance and manner since he had left her but a few hours back at the inn; his indifference to the tidings she had brought him, which if not unexpectedly favourable, should at least have been welcome to him; the strange reply he had made to the official suggestion that the cliff wall should be raised, "the next tenant will see to that," and above all the anxious look which accompanied it, sidelong, tentative, wary, just such a one, in fact, as she would have imagined to belong to one whose reason had become unsettled. Even his occasional bursts of tenderness, though doubtless caused by his genuine affection for herself, had alarmed her from their suddenness and vehemence. Still, upon

the whole, she resolved to confide her suspicions to no one; they might be erroneous; or it may have been only that the excitement of the last two days had been too much for him, and when the sad ceremony of the morrow was over, and things had settled down into their usual course, his mind would regain its equilibrium. Having come to this determination, she sought the drawing-room, at the open window of which Judith and Captain Heyton were sitting, just as she left them. To see the light come into her lover's eyes as they met hers, and how he rose to greet her, was to set at nought the wild warning she had just received, so far at least as Jack was concerned, nor was there the least trace of confusion in Judith's face to corroborate the idea of such treachery as had been suggested.

"How did you find poor Mr. Hulet, Evy?" inquired she, with sympathy.

"Very far from well," returned Evy,

gravely. "What you said of his indisposition to see anybody was only too true. He does not feel equal even to see you, dear Jack."

"I dare say not, poor fellow," returned the captain, pitifully. "He feels all knocked to pieces, I dare say. It is better he should be alone, no doubt, and perhaps, under the circumstances, I ought not to have come to the house myself, eh, Miss Judith?"

For though, as a matter of fact, the captain's heart was too good to ever lead him far wrong in matters of propriety, he had no confidence in himself as to his knowledge of "what was the correct thing to do," and often applied for advice on the subject to people far less qualified than himself to give it.

"Oh, I think Evy may well be your excuse for that," answered Judith, with a smile.

"Ah, you are very good to say so, but I

see how the matter stands," answered the poor captain, turning very red and confused. "Well, I won't come to-morrow, then, if you think it better not—though I shall be at the—hum—melancholy seminary—I mean ceremony at the cemetery—of course, and the next day, Evy, when it is all over" (and here he brightened up amazingly) "I suppose I may come and spend a good long day with you."

"Of course you may, dear," said Evy, who, for her part, saw no reason why he should keep aloof on the morrow, and felt by no means pleased with Judith for having suggested it. "And then I hope poor uncle will be more like himself, and able to see you."

So they two parted, not in the drawing-room before a third person, we may be sure, but in Mr. Hulet's deserted study, which was contiguously convenient for that purpose. They were not to meet again, you see (ex-

cept by a grave-side, which scarcely counts), for forty hours, and the consequence was that the executioner of King Charles the First was the unmoved witness of a very tender scene.

The next day came and went, like most days that are looked forward to either with great pleasure or apprehension, in a less abnormal fashion than had been expected. Death is too dread a king to have his awe intensified by sombre ceremony and observance; and the day of poor Mrs. Hulet's burial passed off much as such days do in all households in which a chair near the hearth has become newly vacant. There was a feeling of oppression rather than of sadness, a resentful endurance of the pomp and show which custom has imposed, and finally, a sense of relief to which all would have blushed to have given utterance. Mr. Hulet, Evy, and Judith, were of course the chief mourners, but many a one came to

the cemetery to show respect for the departed, or sympathy with those she had left behind her. The widower exhibited no passionate emotion, but the traces of the deepest grief were so visible in his features, that it did not require much charity to conclude that the fountain of his tears had been wept dry. Not one word did he speak, either coming to or returning from the ceremony, nor, it was noticed, did he after its performance so much as acknowledge the presence of the few intimate acquaintances that would have been glad to press his hand, and bid God bless him, but stood with Evy's arm held tightly within his own, and his eyes cast down upon the ground.

"If you would only let me sit with you, dear uncle," pleaded Evy, tenderly, when they had got home, and he was wearily ascending the stairs to his own chamber, "instead of shutting yourself up all

alone, I will promise not to speak one word."

Mr. Hulet stopped, and peering over the banisters as though to make sure that no one was within hearing, answered—

"If you wish it, come, dear; I have something to say to you that may as well be said to-day as to-morrow."

Evy accordingly got her work and presently followed him to his own room, where she found him sitting by the open window, with his eyes fixed on the sea, and rapt in thought as on the previous day; since he neither moved nor spoke, Evy addressed him.

"You said you had something to say to me, dear uncle."

"Yes, love, yes, I am thinking over it," sighed he, "thinking how I shall break sad news to a tender heart."

"Nay, uncle, if you have any new trouble tell me at once, and let me help you to bear

it," answered she. "Whatever it is it cannot be so bad as what you have endured already."

"It is trouble of another kind, my darling, but of its kind the worst that can be. Evy"—here he turned his wan face full upon her—"I am ruined!"

"Ruined!" The shock was a terrible one to her; she could not answer like a heroine of romance, "What does that matter, the loss of a little money, when we have each other's affection." She was not a selfish girl, and her first thought was for her uncle, ill and failing, deprived of all the comforts which were necessaries to him, and leading a miserable old age; but her next, and it flashed upon her within the same second, was this, "If he is ruined, I can be no wife for Jack," and at that idea her brave heart, like a strong swimmer seized by sudden cramp, grew chill and sank. It was almost better to believe what

she had feared above all things, but a few hours back, that her uncle had lost his wits—since he might recover them, but fortune never—than that this bitter news was true.

"It is impossible," gasped she.

"My darling, it is true."

"But how, dear uncle? Have you lost your money in speculations?"

"Yes, yes, that is it; speculations."

"This astounds me," observed Evy, slowly. She was not thinking of the speculations, but of the wreck of her loving hopes that had been within such a little of being realized.

"Yes, Evy, you would not have thought me to be one to speculate; but, unhappily, I did so. I got the news by the afternoon's post yesterday, that was what prostrated me so." Here he hid his face and groaned. "If I had ruined myself only, I could bear it, child, but to think that what I had meant

for you, and counted with such pleasure upon giving you, is all gone, too, and through my own weakness."

"Don't think of me, dear uncle; we shall get on together somehow, we two"—she nearly broke down at this, for she meant "we two alone"—"and as for weakness, everybody is weak at times. If you have lost all, it is but money, not self-respect——"

"Yes, that is gone too," interrupted the old man, in despairing tones. "All is gone; all, all!"

There was silence for a little, during which poor Evy strove to piece these fragments, which it seemed were all she was likely to extract from her uncle in the way of explanation, into some sort of consistent whole. That he had really lost a great part of his fortune she could not doubt, but she still hoped that he had exaggerated the calamity, as he had exaggerated his own

blameworthiness in it, for though he might have been weak, she refused to believe that he had done anything to forfeit "self-respect." When a rich man calls himself ruined, that does not, she reflected, generally imply that he is reduced to abject or even distressing poverty. If he could only be got to go into particulars, some plan might perhaps be thought of.

"Well, dearest uncle, we must look our difficulties in the face," observed she, cheerfully; "and perhaps some of them may not then appear so formidable."

"No, no," returned he, with a shudder. "Don't ask me to do that. I dare not think upon them; only be sure that what I have told you is the truth. You see before you—unless a heart of stone can be melted—a penniless—— Hush, what is that without?"

"Nothing, dear," answered Evy, looking

out. "It is only some one opening the drawing-room window."

Mr. Hulet placed his finger to his lips, which had suddenly grown quite white.

"All this which I have told you is a dead secret," whispered he, "remember that."

"Nay, but if you are so poor, people will soon find it out for themselves, dear uncle, though surely Judith, who has been so enriched by my aunt's death, will not think of retaining that large sum you gave to her at my request when we first came hither."

"My dear Evy, you judge others by yourself," returned he, with a strange smile; "Judith is not one to give up anything, nor shall I ask her to do so. I dare say I shall get on well enough; my only anxiety, indeed, is on your account. If I could only see you married——"

There were footsteps on the gravel beneath, and some one coughed. Mr. Hulet motioned with impatience to Evy that she

should shut the window; and then, as though overcome even by that exertion, fell back in his chair, and closed his eyes.

"Dearest uncle," said Evy, in quiet but steady tones, "if *you* have not looked our changed circumstances in the face, I *have.* If we are so poor as you have stated, it is impossible that I should marry Captain Heyton. He has given up enough for me as it is, and——"

"Nay, but that proves his love, Evy," interrupted the old man, rousing himself with an effort, and speaking very eagerly.

"Yes; but it would not prove mine, uncle, if I suffered him to make further sacrifices. He would make them, for he does love me, but——" Here she burst into tears. "May heaven have pity on this poor old man," was her involuntary thought, "though it has none on me——

No, uncle," she went on more firmly, "Captain Heyton will be reconciled to Lord Dirleton, and find a bride more fitting, and, I trust, more worthy, than myself. God bless him; God bless him."

"You shall not give him up, Evy; you shall not!" exclaimed Mr. Hulet, in a shrill and quavering voice; "I don't care what happens——"

Here came a knock at the door, and Judith's voice was heard inquiring, "Is Evy here, Mr. Hulet?"

"Don't let her in," he whispered, in terrified accents; "don't let her in."

"Yes, I am here, Judith. What is it?" answered Evy, softly.

"It is so beautiful on the cliff walk that I came to ask you to come out for a few minutes."

"I cannot come just now," was Evy's cold rejoinder; "I am talking on important matters with my uncle."

There was no answer; and presently they heard Judith's footsteps retire from the door, and go downstairs.

"I am sure, uncle," said Evy, slowly, picking up the thread of talk that had been dropped during this interruption, "that if you were not blinded by your affection for me you would see this matter in the same light as myself. I ought not only to release Captain Heyton from his engagement—for his noble nature might make him decline to accept the quittance—but to refuse to fulfil it."

"Don't ask me," moaned the old man, covering his face with his hands. "Don't ask me, Evy. Did I not answer that awhile ago?"

"You did, uncle; but you have had time to think since then, and have come to a wiser conclusion. I will leave you now a little, though not for long; I think a breath of fresh air would do me good."

She needed fresh air, indeed, yet looked as though neither it nor any other remedy could have done her good. With a white face and trembling limbs she rose, and moved towards her companion; she could not see how he looked, but she could guess. "Don't weep, don't weep, dear uncle," said she, stooping down and stroking his bowed gray head; "this is a hard trial for both of us, but others have borne the like before us. You have been my guardian, my benefactor; a loving father to me for these many years. The time has come at last to show myself mindful of it. We two will walk the world alone together, and you shall lean on me."

She had drawn herself up to her full height by this time, and her face had a strength and purpose in it which were never seen in it before.

"What," said she to herself, as with a steady step she left the room, "shall we

receive good at the hand of God, and shall we not receive evil?" But the bitterness of the evil was yet to come, and in her heart she knew it.

CHAPTER XI.

JUDITH'S ADVICE.

VY was passing hastily to l own room, intending there let the pent-up grief have w which she had restrained for her uncl sake while in his presence, when Jud met her. "You were not coming out me, I fear," said she, significantly.

"No, Judith, I was not; but if you ha anything very particular to say I am your service."

Her tears had dried in their bed in t presence of this woman whom she h learnt within the last few days both to d

trust and to dislike profoundly; hitherto, perhaps, and especially of late, she had also felt some fear of her, but now in her extreme wretchedness she had none.

"Your manner is not gracious, Evy," returned the other, regarding her with a searching look; "I hope you have not been set against me by anybody."

"If you mean by my uncle, no, Judith; we have not even been talking about you. And, in any case, I do not believe the ill that is said of people until they convince me of its truth by their own behaviour."

"That is quite right and charitable, dear; and it is a pity the world does not act on the same principles. It is only too ready to believe things—when they do not redound to our credit."

"You speak, Judith, as if you were referring to something particular."

"Well, to say truth, I am. When I

asked you to walk with me just now, was but the excuse for getting an oppo tunity to speak with you on a matter great importance, and which may, perhaj not admit of delay. May I come in your room, so as to make sure we sh not be interrupted?"

Evy bowed assent, and led the way her own chamber; it was scarcely possil indeed to refuse Judith such a requ without coming to an open rupture wi her, and yet as she crossed the thresho the thought of the ruin that had befall her uncle, and the wreck of her own hop recurred to her with such force and vivi ness, that she felt that any talk upon wh must needs be, by comparison, trivial ma ters would be insupportable to her.

"Do not think me uncivil, Judith, if beg of you to let any communication y may have to make me be as brief as po sible. I have heard bad news, and I fe

that I can scarcely give my attention to aught else."

"Bad news," answered Judith, gravely, "Mr. Hulet has told you then, has he? Poor girl, poor girl."

An hour ago, Evy would have resented the tone of patronizing pity in which her companion spoke, and indeed she winced under it now; but her astonishment at learning that Judith knew of her uncle's misfortune, as her words certainly seemed to imply, overcame all other feelings.

"Yes, he has told me," said Evy, "but he did not say he had told you."

"I can easily believe that," sighed Judith, with a quiet smile.

"Yes, Evy, I know all about it. Your uncle is no longer a rich man. Fortunately, however, it will be in my power to prevent him from being a very poor one."

"And you will do that?" cried Evy,

eagerly. "Oh, Judith, forgive me, for in my heart I have done you wrong. I thought you cold and hard, and so did——" She hesitated and coloured deeply.

"And your uncle, you were about to say, thought so too?" continued Judith, keenly. "Well, well, I don't blame him. It is only natural that a man overwhelmed by misfortune and obloquy should give way to bitter thoughts."

"Obloquy, Judith? That means censure, disgrace—I don't know what you mean. Who has dared to impute bad faith—anything worse than having faith in those unworthy of it—to my uncle?"

"I see," said Judith, slowly. "He has *not* told you, or only told you half."

"I shall return, then, and ask him to tell me all; these odious innuendoes shall be exposed, refuted," cried Evy, rising from her chair; but notwithstanding her bold words, the recollection of her uncle's phrase, "Self-

respect is gone, too; all, all is gone," made her sick at heart.

Judith shrugged her shoulders. "You will do as you please, of course, Evy; but such a course will only distress Mr. Hulet, and cause a breach between himself and me. He will naturally be angry with me for having hinted to you at what he thought it wise, knowing your impulsive character, to keep from your knowledge. He was right it seems, and I was wrong."

Judith's coolness no longer irritated Evy, but appalled her. She was wiser, stronger than herself in every way, and since Mr. Hulet had confessed all to her, he must have judged her (whatever ill opinion he had of her in other respects) at least worthy of his confidence. Judith had the power to serve her uncle, which urged Evy not to offend her; and, above all, she had shown a desire to do so, which had touched her heart.

"Do not be so cold and contemptuous to me, Judith," cried the poor girl; "but if you feel any kindness for me, any tender recollection of the past, be pitiful. I am more wretched than words can tell, or you can guess."

"Poor child, poor child," murmured Judith, this time, as it seemed, with a genuine touch of feeling. "I wish it was in my power to afford you comfort; but as it is, I can do little for you, beyond giving advice—and even that, perhaps, you will distrust and therefore decline."

"Why should I distrust it, Judith?" asked Evy, simply. "I cannot suppose you would willingly deceive me, being your friend, and in such sad straits; you are wiser than I, and better versed in the world's ways, why then should I decline it?"

"Because you have misread my character, Evy, all along," answered Judith,

slowly. "I have had to work my way up the ladder of life, holding fast by each step that I have gained, and without leisure for resting and admiring the prospect such as you have enjoyed. It is true that I have reached a higher round than I had at one time any hopes of doing, but I am only just beginning to know what it is to be safe and at my ease. That sort of bringing up, you know, makes a man—and much more a woman—cautious, unsympathetic, and perhaps even as you have just hinted, cynical. I am not gushing, like you, dear, I confess it. I have never been able to afford to gush; but I hope I have my feelings like other folks. Then, again, I am not blinded by false sentiment; or, if you will have it so, by sentiment of any kind. I see people, that look to you like saints, without their halos; or perhaps, since I was a person of no consequence, the saints did not in my presence give themselves the trouble to

wear them. I saw in the late Mrs. Hule for instance—indeed she never considere it worth while to hide it from me—a selfis hypochondriac, irritating, tiresome, full c the most sensitive feelings as regarded her self, but perfectly pachydermatous whe those of others were concerned—a woma utterly heartless——"

"Pardon me," interrupted Evy, firmly "you are mistaken there. She was no heartless. I do not assert it merely fron my own experience, though she was alway most kind, most thoughtful for me; bu Captain Heyton"—here her voice trembl a little—"will, I am sure, if you ask him corroborate that fact."

"Yes, you see," continued Judith, coolly "every one speaks as he finds, or seems t find. *My* spectacles, as I have told you, di not happen to be rose-tinted. In my eyes Mrs. Hulet was a heartless, insolent wo man."

"Oh, Judith, Judith, remember, she was buried this very day."

"There you are again, my dear Evy, with your sentiment. You would have me speak like an epitaph, rather than hear the truth, and have your feelings shocked. I cannot forget (though I assure you it has been forgiven) the irritation, nay, the disgust, which you exhibited when I ventured to affirm that this very person was unhappy in her lifetime, and might possibly have even sought her death. There, you see, you will not even listen to me. And yet you will have to listen, Evy, if not to me, to others, who will assert this very thing."

"They will do so, then, in the teeth of the truth, which yesterday's verdict has established," said Evy, as calmly as she could.

"The verdict, yes; but that can't prevent the world saying what it pleases, what

it suspects, which brings me round to the very subject on which, for your own sake, Evy, I wished to speak to you, if you will but have the courage, and the honesty, to listen to me."

"I will listen to you, Judith, but I do not promise to believe you."

"Well, that is honest, at all events; and, as it happens, I don't want you to believe me, but only to understand your uncle's position, as it is likely to affect your own. You will not deny, I suppose, that some very unpleasant reflections were made during Mrs. Hulet's lifetime upon the cat-and-dog life (as some people called it) which she and her husband led together; so long as they were both alive, the fault was attributed to both; 'it was six of one and half a dozen of the other,' the gossips said, but now that one is dead the survivor comes in for all the reprobation. This would perhaps have happened in any case,

but the unexpectedness and mystery of Mrs. Hulet's death have been such as to give malice a very grievous handle. I say nothing of my own opinions, please to observe, Evy; I am merely describing (and they are, after all, but natural) the ideas that I know are passing through the minds of others concerning the matter, and which are certain to find expression."

"They have been expressed already, Judith, in the verdict."

"There you are quite wrong. The verdict having, as it were, favoured your uncle, public opinion will be all the less inclined to spare him."

"Favoured?" observed Evy. "That is a very unpleasant term."

"But it is a true one. Neither coroner nor jury would place themselves in an invidious position if they could help it. If they had any justifiable means of escaping from it, even in an undoubted criminal

case, they are always prone, you know, to give the prisoner 'the benefit of the doubt.' There was here, of course, neither crime nor prisoner; but Evy, if I had given such evidence as I could have given"—and here Judith's voice sank low, though every word was clear and incisive—"if I had expressed the opinions I had expressed to you, and which I was asked to give, those men would have had no such loophole. They must needs have returned an open verdict, 'Found Drowned,' or some such phrase, which would have left this matter unsettled, even legally, and liable to be reopened at any time. And that, at least, Evy, has been averted. Your uncle need apprehend no further trouble from the law; and if he asks, as perhaps he is now asking himself, to what good fortune he is indebted for this result, I reply that he is indebted to you. Mind, I may have been wrong throughout. Mrs. Hulet may have had no more idea of com-

mitting suicide than you or I, or if she did commit it, it may have had nought to do with her husband's conduct; but such was my honest opinion, and but for your sake, and for the words you spoke to me as I entered that jury-room, I should have done my duty, and expressed it. As it is, when your read my evidence in the newspaper, you will willingly allow that I have permitted truth (or what I considered to be such) to weigh but little against the claims of friendship."

"Indeed," said Evy, slowly, "I suppose I ought to be thankful to you so far, though if you had expressed what seems to have been your conviction, you would have done my uncle a very grievous wrong."

"Well, we will not discuss that, Evy, especially since the solid results of the affair are in your favour. But what I wish to make you understand is, that others will

not give up this point, and that your u
knows it. It is true that he has suffe
great losses, but he does not impose u
me when he states that it is on their
count he is so suddenly about to leave
neighbourhood. He is well aware tha
will presently be made very unpleasant
him, even if it does not become too
to hold him; and I am much mistake
what I am now about to say to you
not already passed through his own mi
For him it would be difficult to expres
and for me it is not easy, since it conce
you, my dear Evy, in the tenderest r
tions of your life. Nobody who kn
Captain Heyton——"

"Judith," interrupted Evy, with dign
"I cannot permit this. I cannot gu
indeed, what you are about to say, b
your advice to me has anything to do
my relations with Captain Heyton, I n
beg of you not to give it. I may not

the best judge, but I should certainly be the only one upon such a matter. Even my uncle——"

"Ah, he has been speaking to you on the subject then," cried Judith, triumphantly. "Well, you won't let me speak on it; but at all events let my entreaties be added to his. I can guess what he has told you or has wished to tell; and he is right. The consequences of delay just now—the giving way to conventional propriety in postponing your marriage in consequence of what has happened here—may be fatal to you."

"You are speaking in enigmas, Judith; I don't know what you mean."

"Nay, it is clear enough; Captain Heyton is too faithful, too honourable to give you up merely because you have become poor; he may himself disregard the scandalous rumours that are sure to circulate concerning your uncle; but as these

grow and grow, just as the circles in the water when a stone is dropped in it, they will presently reach the ears of Lord Dirleton. This will set his lordship more against his nephew's union with yourself than ever, and may induce him to withdraw even that sum for which he has, as it were, commuted his inheritance. What your uncle would have you do then, and I, and all your well wishers, is to lose no time in making the captain your own——"

"Forbear," cried Evy, passionately; "I will hear no more, Judith. It is perhaps through that bringing up of yours, to whose charge you have laid other peculiarities of your character which to my mind are not pleasing, that you offer advice, so strange, so coarse, so——"

"Don't spare me, dear," observed Judith, coolly, perceiving that her companion was hesitating as to whether she should use even some stronger word to express her

feelings, "if it is any relief to you to speak out; I spoke out myself, because I felt that this matter was one of the last importance to you; that there was no time for false delicacy——"

"Nor for delicacy of any kind, one would think," broke in Evy, indignantly; "It may be that you mean me well, and I am content to believe it; but I must beg of you to drop this subject, and to be silent upon it for the future."

Once more Judith shrugged her plump shoulders, but this time keeping her eyes fixed on the carpet, as though in some embarrassment.

"I very much regret I have annoyed you, Evy; since you bid me be silent, I of course obey you, though I think had I used the grace of manner that you possess yourself, and expressed my views upon this matter less bluntly, I should have escaped giving you offence. Believe me,

once for all, I intended none.—Don't you think a stroll in the garden would do you good, dear? Well, well, perhaps you are right. When one has got to think out a matter of importance, one's own room is the best place after all. But you look dreadfully fagged and worried, so I shall tell Jane to bring you up a cup of tea."

A cup of tea! Most feminine complaints, it is true, are greatly mitigated by that sovereign remedy; but Evy's case was beyond it. A cup of poison would have been more welcome to her. Indeed, so far as herself was concerned, she would in that supreme hour of hopelessness and humiliation, have hailed death gladly. The sunshine of existence was over for ever; the darkness was closing in around her young life without a hope of dawn. She had known before that she must give up her lover; the terrible stigma attaching to her uncle, of which Judith had spoken, made

no difference as to that; but in the former case she had felt some supporting sense of sacrifice of self, of loving duty towards him; and that was gone now. Only the bare wretched fact remained. How she envied her poor aunt (whom she had so pitied awhile ago), removed from this world of shame and trouble! One thing only gave her strength—the recollection of the gray-haired broken man she had left in yonder room, with none to lean on except her. To him, she would henceforth dedicate herself, as many a girl of another faith, whose love-dream has been shattered, dedicates herself to heaven. It was a no less sacred calling, and indeed, in the true sense, it was the same. Happiness in her future was not to be expected, but peace might still be found. Yes, for now she would "suffer and be strong," and help her uncle to live down whatever ill-report might soil the tongues of men concerning

him. But her heart was sad and sore, indeed, within her, and all its chambers that had been furnished forth to entertain the guest that maidens sigh for, were emptied and made desolate.

CHAPTER XII.

DISCARDED.

TO think upon the wretchedness that had so suddenly come upon her, to exchange her bright visions of happiness for forebodings for the future that were only too certain to be realized, was trial enough for a tender heart like Evy's; but there was worse than bitter thoughts to be encountered—it was necessary for her to act. She must herself invite the last stroke of evil fortune, in telling her lover that he was hers no longer. By word of mouth, she felt that she could never accomplish this. If he once got speech

with her, and asked, "But do you no longer love me, then?" she could not answer, "Nay." Her whole soul revolted against that falsehood as against some hideous blasphemy. To see him, to touch his hand, to hear his voice, and then to dismiss him, was an ordeal too terrible for her to face. No, she could not do it. She must write. Human misery is well-nigh unfathomable, its lowest depths have scarcely ever been reached by any of us, though they have often seemed to be so. Many and many a woman who has lost, not a lover, but a husband and lover, also; not an untried friend in whom they have a passionate trust, but one who has proved himself a friend through years of shadow and sunshine; many a widow, I say, has doubtless suffered far more than Evy Carthew had to bear, since, though she was doomed to go unaccompanied through the world, she had not known what it was to be other-

wise; had only dreamt of another self—only stronger, wiser, bolder, and more loved than self—who was henceforth to be added to herself, and did not know what it is to possess such a one and then to lose him:

> "To weep a loss for ever new,
> A void where heart on heart reposed;
> And where warm hands have pressed and closed,
> Silence, till they be silent too."

If she had thought of that it would have been no consolation to her, for her nature was too unselfish to take comfort from the reflection that others may be as miserable as ourselves, or even more so; but she did not think of it; it seemed to her that of all human creatures upon whom the early summer sun was setting that evening, she must surely be the most forlorn and wretched. The letter to her lover was not the difficulty that some might have expected it to be; words flow free and fast enough when woe makes us despairing; it is only where there is hope—alternative—

that one needs to pick and choose for them. She dwelt not much but strongly upon the completeness of the ruin that had befallen her uncle; on the sacrifice that her lover had already made for her, and which, she said, she had been wrong to accept, and on the absolute impossibility of her permitting him to proceed farther in the path of self-denial. Then she touched upon the calamity that had recently befallen her home; she could not bring herself to hint at the scandalous rumours of which Judith had spoken, though they were very present to her mind, but she spoke of her uncle as being as broken in health and spirits as in fortune, and needing for the future her exclusive care. Even if circumstances had not otherwise changed with her, it would have been only her duty, she said, to have given up the idea of marriage for years to come, if not altogether, upon this account alone. As it was, she

said, her resolution was immutable. She did not pretend that her affection for her lover had suffered any diminution; but she besought him by it, for her own sake, to take this communication as final. Not to do so would be to put her to inexpressible distress; while the answer to any letter, the result of any interview, must needs be still the rejection of his suit. She stated this in the most distinct and positive manner of which she was capable, and then concluded with a few words of farewell, that cost her more than all the rest. The pen trembled in her fingers, and the tears rained down upon the page, as she bade him forget her, and forgive the pain she had caused him, and wished him a more worthy wife, and happy days. Then she signed it — merely with her name — she might not write, "Your loving Evy," nor could she bring herself to set down colder words—just Evy Carthew.

When Jane came with the cup of tea, the letter was ready for the post and Evy despatched it thither by her hand; when it should once be gone, and out of her power to recall it, it seemed to her that she would feel more calm; passionate regrets would be stifled, being no longer stirred by doubt. And to some extent this was so. As when a stately ship, rudely buffeted by tempest, has lost mast and rigging, which do not quite fall clear, but have to be cut away, and being so, rights herself, and though disfigured and shorn of what was her chief pride, contrives to make her way towards port, so she, having with her own hand cast off all that made life worth living for, seemed now more able, though having no haven, at least to keep afloat upon the troubled waves.

As though she would at once have begun that lifelong task she had imposed upon herself, Evy returned to her uncle's room,

and with difficulty prevailed upon him to partake of some refreshment—for he had touched nothing throughout the day. He had it brought to him upstairs, and imagined that Evy had had her dinner as usual; whereas a piece of bread would that day have gone nigh to choke her, even had not the presence of Judith at table put her eating anything out of the question. She was not angry with Judith. Her own exceeding wretchedness forbade her entertaining any such feeling toward her; but she felt that her companionship would be just then intolerable. And so the evening wore away, and the night came on wherein she could neither sleep nor weep, and the longed-for dawn appeared at last only to mock her with its light and song.

Then she arose, and went out into the garden, and paced the cliff-walk till breakfast-time. That was about the hour, she knew, when Jack would get her letter.

Would he write to her in return, or yield to her entreaties and not write? If he wrote he would be sure to send his answer by special messenger. Whatever it might be, it could make no difference, as she had told him, but the thought that his dear hand might at that moment be penning his words of farewell as she hoped, of passionate vain remonstrance as she feared, and then that the note was on its way, and would arrive shortly, made her heart flutter within her like some dying bird, who sees its mistress coming to the cage with dainties which it cannot welcome more. How different from the eager beat with which but yesterday it had hailed the sight of him!

To escape such thoughts, and also perhaps to procrastinate her meeting with Judith, who was already due at the tea-urn, she was about to seek her uncle's room to inquire after him, when the sound

of horse's hoofs fell upon her ear. There was some one coming down the lane that led from the high road to the cottage at full gallop. That surely must be Captain Heyton's messenger, unless, indeed, it were himself! If it was he, then he was cruel. If he compelled her to a personal interview, after what she had written to him, it would be to torture her. Well, tender women have been racked before now, and have not confessed, and she would not confess how all her life was emptied of its joy because she could not wed him. It was ungenerous of him, and unfair, and since he drove her to it, she would defend herself with the weapon of the weak—with any weapon—but no, she would not see him.

"Jane," said she, as the gate bell pealed without, "if that is Captain Heyton, I do not wish to see him. Tell him, please, that I have walked out," and with that

she passed into the shrubbery that ran behind the house, and underneath the ruddy cliffs, ruddier in the morning sun. From path to path she hurried, and sat down at last in a stone arbour at the very extremity of the grounds, and which had the sea beneath it and around it. He would never surely be so importunate as to pursue her thither after he had received Jane's message? But would Jane, with whom the captain was a great favourite, and who had looked, when Evy had told her to deny her to him, as though her young mistress had gone mad, deliver the message? Or, what was worse, suppose that she should give but the half of it, and say that Miss Evy was walking in the shrubbery, and, as it were, awaiting him there! Minute after minute passed by, and yet, though she strained her ears to catch it, there was no sound of the horse's returning hoofs. It could scarcely then

be only a messenger that had arrived. On the other hand, he might be waiting for an answer, and Jane would in that case bring her out the note. But that footstep is not Jane's, though she strives to persuade herself it is; nor is that plaintive, passionate cry the note of the sea-gull that is whirling about the arbour like a flake of snow; it is "Evy, Evy, where *are* you, Evy?" and the voice is that of her lover. It was impossible to avoid the interview he had thus forced upon her, for she had nowhere to betake herself save, what indeed seemed almost a welcome shelter, the depths of the placid sea. So she rose up, and went forth to meet him on the narrow path.

When he caught sight of her, Jack uttered a glad cry, and ran forwards towards her, but slackened his pace when he drew near.

"Why do you look like that, dear Evy?"

asked he, simply, "and refuse even to take my hand?"

"Because it is most distressing to me, Captain Heyton, to see you here. I had hoped—I had expected—that after my letter you would have spared me so sharp a pain."

"Your letter, Evy! Did you suppose, then, that a few hasty words of yours, written under the pressure of calamity, would be accepted by me as final? When a man receives his death warrant, it is only reasonable that he should wish to make quite sure that the signature is genuine; that there is no mistake; and even then he throws himself at his sovereign's feet—and are you not my sovereign, Evy?—and beseeches her to revoke her sentence."

"It is not possible, Captain Heyton, as I wrote to you, to alter the resolve to which I have come. You can torture me, of course—you are doing it now—but you cannot

turn me from my purpose. For pity's sake, then, leave me."

"Leave you, Evy? give up my hopes of happiness, and the only object, to be called such, of my life, because you chance to entertain an exaggerated idea of the value of money, and a Quixotic sense of duty? No. I will never leave you upon such grounds as those. I have money enough still, not only for both of us, but to afford a home for Mr. Hulet under our own roof, which shall shelter him to his life's end. My uncle may alter his resolve or not—if he sees you, darling, I cannot but believe he will—but if he does not, nay, even if he should take away what he has promised us —which is to the last degree unlikely—there is still no shame in being poor."

For an instant Evy had suffered the sweet voice of comfort to steal into her ear; for an instant she had permitted herself to gaze on that bright picture of the

future, which her lover had so earnestly presented to her; but those words "there is no shame" recalled her to the realities of her position, and gave an unexpected succour to the failing powers of her resolve.

"There would be shame, Captain Heyton," interrupted she. "Do not ask me how or what, but there would be shame. I gave you reasons in my letter, all-sufficient reasons as I still think, why, from henceforth, you and I must be strangers to one another; but there are others, also, which I am not compelled to state."

"Indeed, I think I have a right to hear them, Evy."

"I think not, Captain Heyton."

"At all events, tell me this much; have they reference to yourself, or to your uncle only?"

"To my uncle."

"Yes, I thought so," answered the cap-

tain, impetuously. "This old man, selfish and fanciful, has suddenly taken it into his head that he will not be so well looked after—that he will not have such an attentive slave in you, when you are married, as at present. Or, perhaps, he doubts the word of honour that I have passed to him, and believes that I shall throw my means away upon the race-course, or at the gambling table. Yes, that is it; and you are his dupe. I don't believe in this story of his sudden ruin."

"You have it in my own handwriting, sir," said Evy, with dignity.

"Yes; but Mr. Hulet may have imposed upon you. At all events, it is clear that you are sacrificing my happiness to his caprices. You love your uncle more than me; you do, I see, Evy; you are giving me up for him. Tell me," added he, with vehemence, "is it not so?"

She could not answer him at first, in

words, but catching the path railing for support, she looked him steadily in the face, and bowed her head. Let him imagine that she loved her uncle better than himself, and so depart from her, half-cured of his own love.

"Yes," replied she, "it was so."

"Then I do leave you, Evy," said he, bitterly; "and would to heaven that I had never seen your face."

As if to hide it from his view, she put up her hands, and uttered a low moan. Her agony was almost greater than she could bear. To hear him say that he wished that! She had loved and lost, herself, but she would not have missed that love which she had lost for all the wealth of the world. How could he, could he say such words as those!

"You have changed a wholesome heart to gall, girl," continued he; "doubtless that proof of your power for evil flatters

your vanity: let it do so: be happy after your own fashion. I wish you no ill, though you have done such ill to me. I had heard, all my life, that women were vain and deceitful, shallow except in their hates, weak except in their passions, and, until I saw you, I believed it. Your beauty, goodness, truth (as I once thought), won me, not only to yourself, but filled me with a reverence unknown before for all your sex. Oh, you have fooled me finely, I confess it. Now go, and tell them that you have undeceived your miserable dupe at last. It has cost me something, I confess, but now I know them."

He lifted his hat, turned sharp upon his heel, and was gone without another word.

She watched him, with her tearless, heated eyes, move with swift steps along the devious path to the very cottage door; and he never once looked back. She listened for the hasty beat of his horse's hoofs that

were to "Beat, beat, beat," she knew,—where was it that she had read that line?—"beat into her tortured brain," but it came not: only that plaintive cry of the gull broke the summer silence, and the distant splash of the flowing wave. Was it a dream, a horrible, shameful dream, or had she really seen and heard the man she loved thus look and speak? What had she done to provoke him to do so? That he should have been disappointed at the failure of his entreaties, vexed at her resistance to them, she could have imagined; but why should he have left her—never to see her again while life should last—thus piqued and bitter. "True as I once thought," he had said, but was she not true still? Ah, yes; truer than ever, although she had discarded him, more loving than ever, although he had overwhelmed her with such unmerited reproaches. Why had he judged her false? Was it because she had

suffered him to believe that she loved her uncle better than himself. Well, that was false . . . . and yet if he had said that he preferred his duty to Lord Dirleton to his love for her, she would not have turned upon him with such barbed words. "Preferred his duty," yes; but she had not said that. She had permitted him to think—reckless of what she did, or doing so, perhaps, in hopes, at all hazards, to end that terrible scene—that she held him second in the world, and another first. "Vain, deceitful, shallow"—yes, indeed, she had been all these if he thought that . . . . A high-spirited man who had been cruelly used, he was in no respect to be blamed. There went the horse's hoofs at last; not fast as she had expected them to go, beneath an angry rider, but at a foot's pace. And he had delayed his departure for near an hour. She knew that because the shade had sloped so far towards her from

the upper cliff. He had stood there—she knew the spot to a hair's breadth—with the sun behind him, showing his proud presence, handsomer, nobler than she had ever seen it, and now the shadow had crept on and on, so cold that it made her shiver——

"Evy, dear; Evy."

It was Judith's voice, calling to her from the hillock near the porch, and doubtless summoning her to breakfast. Such an unaccustomed gentleness and pity were in its tone that Evy sighed, "I wonder has he told her?" ere she took her weary way towards the house.

CHAPTER XIII.

DEEP BEYOND DEEP.

OF actual pain there was no more for Evy that morning; she had been on the rack too long to feel it. But had she been less tried, there would have been many a pang in store for her. To sit at that silent breakfast-table, and pretend for her uncle's sake to eat, and watch his white, worn face staring straight before him, like a man of stone, was a sad ordeal. Then, scarcely was it over, than who should come but Mr. De Coucy, full of talk, but carefully avoiding any reference to the late calamity, save what was implied

by the significant pressure of his hand. Upon the whole his presence seemed to cheer his host a little, or perhaps it was that when he came Judith withdrew from the room, a circumstance which, whenever it happened, always seemed to afford Mr. Hulet some sense of relief.

"Well, my dear sir," said the visitor, after exhausting several topics, which had no interest either for himself or his hearers, but were obviously introduced with the benevolent intention of distracting their thoughts from the subject on which he took it for granted they were dwelling, "I want to have a talk with you about that portrait of your ancestor—John Hulet, is it not?"

An expression of pain, caused doubtless by the recollection that that historical personage had been the cause of his last quarrel with her who was now no more, flitted across his descendant's face.

"The matter, indeed, can be discussed another time," continued Mr. De Coucy, hastily, "but I would wish you, when you have leisure, my dear Hulet, to put together such documents as you possess concerning the authenticity of the picture. It is not mere curiosity that prompts me to ask this, I do assure you; and by-the-by —for strange as it may seem, it is by-the-by—that reminds me that I have just met our gallant captain on his gray, looking like Death on the Pale Horse—you must have been snubbing him very much, my dear young lady?"

"Has Heyton been here this morning, Evy?" asked Mr. Hulet, raising his bowed head, and exhibiting, for the first time, some signs of interest.

"Yes, uncle."

Only those two words, yet there was something in the tone in which she spoke them that startled both her hearers.

"I hope—I trust, dear Evy, that nothing has happened?"

"Nothing more, uncle, than what I told you needs must happen," returned Evy, calmly. "It is quite as well that Mr. De Coucy, as a valued friend of ours, and—and his—should hear it from my lips, before it becomes the common talk it doubtless will be. My engagement with Captain Heyton is at an end."

"Great heaven!" cried Mr. De Coucy, rising to his feet, "but this is incredible. It must not be—it shall not be."

"It *is*," answered Evy, decisively. "Captain Heyton and I have parted for ever. There was no quarrel, Mr. De Coucy, nor anything of such a nature as you probably conjecture, and if there was a fault on either side, it was not on his side. Pray do not wound me——"

"But, my dear young lady, this in monstrous—you cannot tell how monstrous—

how grievously such a course would be to be deprecated, though in a day or two, perhaps, I may be in a position to convince you of it. Hulet, speak to the girl. Are you both out of your minds ?"

"My uncle and I are quite in accord upon the subject," returned Evy, firmly; "circumstances have occurred since you last saw us——"

"What, since two days ago ?"

"Yes; or at least they have come to our knowledge since then, which put it quite out of the question that I should marry Captain Heyton. He has been made aware of them himself, and acquiesces —yields, I should say, to an overpowering necessity."

"Hulet, my dear friend," exclaimed Mr. De Coucy, earnestly, "let me hear you speak; tell me that this is a mistake—a remediable one—owing to some fanciful, though doubtless creditable, objections

raised by this excellent girl. She thinks she is causing Jack to make too great a sacrifice in giving up his expectations. Tell me that and make me happy."

"No, no," groaned Mr. Hulet, "I cannot. Evy knows what is best. It is not her fault, heaven bless her; it is mine, all mine."

"Do not pain my uncle thus, dear Mr. De Coucy," pleaded Evy. "It is no one's fault, but a misfortune that has overwhelmed us both. Pray respect it, and be silent. For one thing, though that is not the chief cause of what has happened, we have had a severe pecuniary loss."

"Yes, we are ruined," said Mr. Hulet, slowly.

There was a long silence, during which, whether from embarrassment or emotion, Mr. De Coucy twice strove in vain to speak.

"After the command you have laid upon

me, my dear Miss Evy," said he, presently, in a voice as tender as though it belonged to a young lover, and as reverent as that of a priest at prayer, "I will urge nothing further; but as to this ruin pray permit me to say that never before have I experienced any satisfaction in being a wealthy man. My good friend" (here he turned with a frank smile to Mr. Hulet), "let me make a confession, which I have little doubt will be news to you, since your niece has too kindly a nature not to have spared me a humiliation when she could, though others of her sex would have taken pleasure in inflicting it. I was fool enough on our first acquaintance to make this young lady an offer of marriage. She will not suppose, I know, after what has occurred, that I should ever be so ungenerous, or insane, as to do it again. She always will think of me, I hope, as a second father, another uncle, like yourself; and she will not refuse,

I trust, to accept my affectionate help and service in that capacity. The fact is, my dear Hulet—though as I don't want to be made much of for my money, I wish the fact to remain a secret among our three selves—I am as rich as Plutus. Now don't—don't look so proud and pained, good friend. What is the use of a friendship, the sole restriction of which is that no man should ever help his fellow. I have not a poor relation in the world, nor any human being dependent on me. Why the deuce shouldn't I adopt Miss Evy yonder, if I like, just as your poor wife adopted her young friend, Miss Judith."

Over Mr. Hulet's listening face, which had been hitherto overspread with a grateful, if not an assenting smile, there passed a cloud of sadness; he sighed, like one who, having for a space forgotten his griefs, is suddenly reminded of them, while the

words that he had been apparently about to utter faded on his tongue.

"It is impossible, dear Mr. De Coucy," answered Evy, whose attention none of these appearances escaped, "to over-estimate our sense—for I am sure I am expressing my uncle's sentiments as well as my own—of the very great generosity and kindness of your offer; but, indeed, indeed, sir, we cannot accept it, I thank you for it, with all my heart; but we would wish to make our own way in the world without help, even though proffered so delicately as yours has been, and lean on one another rather than on a friend. Would we not, uncle?"

"Yes, yes; heaven bless you for your friendship, De Coucy; but Evy knows what is best for us," answered Mr. Hulet, in slow mechanical tones.

It almost seemed as though, in relegating his powers of judgment and de-

cision to his niece, he had made over to her also those of speech, so inactive had his once so ready tongue become.

"You refuse then, from fear of incurring some wretched sense of obligation, to give me any opportunity of proving my regard," said Mr. De Coucy, in offended tones.

"Oh, indeed, sir, you are wrong," put in Evy, earnestly; "we have incurred that sense already, and it is very far from making us wretched; in my eyes, at least, your noble conduct strikes like a burst of sunshine through this disastrous day. You will not part from us in anger, surely?"

"No, my dear Miss Evy, no," answered Mr. De Coucy, taking both her hands in his; "but only in sorrow and disappointment. If you ever think better of this harsh resolve, you will be giving me the greatest—I had almost said the only—

pleasure which life has to offer me, in letting me know it. For the present I will say no more upon that subject. You are going to leave the cottage, I hear ?"

"I believe so," answered Evy, quietly, and turning to her uncle, who, rousing himself with an effort, answered,

"Yes, we go in a few days; the furniture will be sold at once; and by-the-by, De Coucy, you will be doing me a kindness if you will call at Dale's, the auctioneer, and send him up to me."

"I will do that," said Mr. De Coucy, with a little sigh, as he took up his hat. "Good-bye, Hulet, for the present, then, and God help you—unless, indeed, you are not too proud to ask help of Him."

The two men shook hands with a warmth that neither had ever evinced before, and Evy accompanied their visitor to the front door.

"One moment, Mr. De Coucy," said she,

taking him aside into the study; "you said that you had heard we were going to quit the cottage; who told you that?"

"Really, my dear Miss Evy, I don't know. I——"

"I see," said Evy; "it is the common gossip."

"Yes, just so; you know how people's tongues do run at Balcombe."

"But they must have given some reason for it, and not the right one, since they did not know of my uncle's misfortune, with regard to money matters. What was it?"

The old man's cheek became white and red by turns.

"There was no reason, absolutely none," he stammered. "I was a fool to mention it. It was conjectured, I suppose, after what had happened here, you know, that the place would be distasteful to Mr. Hulet."

"That was not all, Mr. De Coucy, though your kindness would conceal from me the rest. It was something in connection with the verdict."

"Well, perhaps it was. Vulgar minds are almost always ill-natured, my dear young lady. They like scandal; which not even the law has power to restrain. Such people are beneath contempt or notice."

"I need ask no more," sighed Evy. "but you may show your friendship, dear Mr. De Coucy, in one way yet. If any one speaks of my poor uncle as anything but a good, kind——"

"I know, I know," interrupted the other, tenderly; "oh, pray don't give way like that, unless you wish to see an old man weep. Your uncle's marriage was not a happy one, but no one who knew him would suspect him of unkindness. I wish all Balcombe had one neck, and then I'd

throttle it. Good-bye, good-bye, Miss Evy. You have many a firm friend yet, each of whom is worth a thousand of such babblers; and I cannot think this world is so ill-governed, that happy days are not still in store for you."

Then placing his hand upon her head, which shook in sad dissent, the old man murmured an earnest "Heaven bless you," and hurried away.

It was a pitiful sight, indeed, from which he fled, for Evy, finding her worst fears realized with respect to what was rumoured concerning her unhappy uncle, had for the moment utterly broken down. The one thought, so soon as she grew calm enough to think, was how to keep this wicked scandal from Mr. Hulet's ears, to get him away from the neighbourhood of Balcombe, and its evil tongues, for, if their venom should once reach him, she verily believed that it would kill him as surely as any

serpent's bite. With this idea uppermost in her mind she returned to the drawing-room, and not finding her uncle where she had left him, was about to seek him in the garden, when her attention was arrested by these words:

"I tell you, sir, as I told you before, that I wish to hear no explanation on that subject from your lips——"

"But, Judith, if I proved to you——"

"It would be all the same. I could not believe my ears against the testimony of my eyes. Such importunity, let me add, is most shocking and offensive to me——"

Evy had only just time to hurry back and close the drawing-room door before the two speakers entered that apartment from the lawn. What she had heard she could not avoid hearing, and yet she felt that not for the world would she have had them know that she had heard it. To have shown that she had done so, would

have been, in the first place, to inflict a cruel humiliation upon her uncle, for nothing could have exceeded the imperious insolence of Judith's tone. Nor could it have been the first time that she had thus spoken to him. "I tell you, sir, as I told you before," she had said; and "your importunity is most shocking and offensive."

What could have happened to justify, or rather to embolden Judith to make use of such astounding language? was the thought that thrilled Evy's frame with a chill of horror, as she fled noiselessly upstairs into her own room. That Judith had always disliked Mr. Hulet, Evy of course was well aware, but she also knew that she had entertained a wholesome dread of him, and why had that dread so utterly disappeared that not even the shadow of it was left where it had so lately existed? She called to mind Mr.

Hulet's excessive nervousness on the occasion of her own interview with him of the day before, lest Judith should overhear their talk through the open window, and coupling it with his almost suppliant tone upon the present occasion, she could not but conclude that for some reason or other her uncle was afraid of Judith. What circumstance, then, could possibly have occurred to reverse, as it were, so suddenly their mutual relations, save one—the possession of some compromising secret; and what could that subject be, "too shocking and offensive" to be listened to, except Mrs. Hulet's death. Her mind flashed to this conclusion through all the arguments which affection strove to interpose. Yes: either her unhappy aunt had really committed suicide, or Judith had convinced herself that such was the case, and possessed the means of convincing others. Upon this supposition, and on this alone,

the hints Judith had let fall to Mr. Hulet's disadvantage on his wife's disappearance from the cottage were explicable enough, and also her conduct at the inquest. She had wished to avoid facing the jury if it were possible, on the plea of indisposition, but upon being compelled to do so would have revealed all she knew, or suspected, but for her own appeal to her at the last moment. Evy's nature, though tender and impulsive, was eminently just, and she gave credit to Judith for all the moral difficulties which she herself would have had to encounter if placed in a like position. There was one sentence in what she had overheard that pointed with inexorable finger to the conclusion that Judith knew rather than suspected that Mrs. Hulet had come to her death by her own act: "I could not believe my ears," Judith had said, "against the testimony of my eyes." To see was certainly something vastly

more than to suspect, though what that was which she had seen, it was utterly impossible to conjecture. Evy did not believe even yet that her aunt had committed suicide, though she felt that Judith believed it; and even if she had committed it, she would fain have ascribed it to aberration of mind, rather than to the one alternative, an uncontrollable fit of melancholy subsequent to that rupture with her husband, which had certainly exceeded in violence all their previous quarrels. It was probably the former view, which Mr. Hulet had been so solicitous to press on Judith, and to which the latter had refused to listen; and there was something to be said for her—some excuse for her hostile incredulity—it must be confessed.

Shut fast in her own chamber, and working out this terrible problem, without prejudice—so far as it was possible for her to discard it—Evy was compelled to arrive

at this result; she was convinced, indeed, that her uncle was innocent; whatever irritation he might have exhibited with respect to his wife, his behaviour towards her had not been such as to have driven any woman in her right mind to commit self-destruction, but on the other hand, Judith believed that she had committed it, and probably from that very cause. It was true that Judith had not evinced any strong affection for her patroness (nay, the reverse), but in old times she might have entertained such a feeling, and, at all events, when Mrs. Hulet had thus miserably perished, the sense of her ancient kindness might well have stirred up the girl's hostility towards him whom she believed to have been morally to blame for the catastrophe. She would feel a natural abhorrence and contempt for him, which would be by no means mitigated by the reflection that she had acted contrary to

her own sense of duty, contrary, indeed, to the oath that she had taken to speak "the whole truth," at the inquest, in order to save him from obloquy, if not from legal censure; nor did Evy fail to reflect that it was for her own sake, and at her own special prayer — though she had little known against what force of conviction she had been pleading—that this had been done. Upon the whole, then, Evy was not now inclined to reproach Judith for the part she had lately played so severely as she had done; she could not like her, but she felt that she had judged her harshly, and took a step backward, as it were, from that brink of loathing, on which she had almost stood. At the same time the pity for her uncle, which before had seemed incapable of larger growth, filled all her swelling heart, and, for the moment, drowned the sense of her own bitter woe.

CHAPTER XIV.

IN NEED AND INDEED.

WHILE Evy was still pondering upon the terrible disclosure which accident had thus revealed to her, there came a knock at the door, which not only startled her from her reflections, but accompanied as it was by the voice of one who had been the chief subject of them, had the effect of disturbing her conclusions. So long as she had been alone, she had weighed the whole matter with an impartiality that had astonished herself; but no sooner did she hear the voice of Judith, than all her old

antipathy and repugnance to her seemed to return with tenfold force. She had been weighing her in the scale of justice, as a something apart from, and without any personal reference to, herself; and now she suddenly awakened to the sense that this girl, on the other side of the panel, was to be her daily and only companion, perhaps for years; she had been making allowances for her, which had seemed reasonable enough, yet her very efforts to be just now appeared to have exhausted charity and patience alike, and to have made Judith's society intolerable.

"What is it?" answered she, with a strange reluctance even to address her by name.

"Mrs. Storks has come, and wishes particularly to see you."

"Where is my uncle?"

"In his room."

Evy hesitated a moment. She felt very

unequal to the task of conversing with any one, even with a friend like Mrs. Storks. The idea of having once more to repeat her tale of trouble, as it would be necessary to do, however briefly, and to have to listen to kindly but useless expressions of sympathy—"the vacant chaff well meant for grain"—or worse, as in Mr. De Coucy's case, to arguments in favour of what was now even more than ever out of the question, a reconciliation with Captain Heyton, positively appalled her. Yet it was certain that her uncle could still less endure such an interview; and was not this an opportunity to save him pain, and commence, as it were, that path of devotion to her unhappy benefactor, which she had made up her mind to tread?

"Please to say that I will be with her directly." Evy felt that it was not civil of her to keep the door closed, and yet, at that moment, when she required all her

calmness, she could not trust herself to meet Judith face to face. There was no reply; but as though something more had been expected from her, Judith waited for a moment at the door, ere she turned to go downstairs. She was annoyed, no doubt, and justly so; and with her retreating footsteps a feeling of contrition for her own coldness arose in Evy's heart; but also one of intense relief. She felt sorry, but yet more comfortable in her mind, like one who has smashed a beetle. Then she smoothed her hair, as all women do in preparation for an interview, whether with bridegroom at the altar, or executioner at the block, and went down into the drawing-room, where, as she expected, she found Mrs. Storks alone. Judith always avoided her if possible, as vinegar declines to mix with the oil that is sure to get the upper hand of it.

"Evy, dear, I have seen Mr. De Coucy,

and know all," were the visitor's first words, spoken with singular tenderness and affection. "I am not come to ask painful questions, nor to seek to change a resolution, the grounds of which ought to be better understood by yourself than any other person. The only excuse I have for intruding on your sorrow is that I wish to be of use if I can."

There was a simplicity and earnestness in the widow's tone that took Evy's gentle heart by storm. She had always liked Mrs. Storks, but had scarcely given her credit for the depth of feeling which her handsome face, as it bent down to kiss her cheek, and her arm as it clung in loving protection round her waist, now manifestly displayed. She not only felt grateful for it, as in Mr. De Coucy's case, but comforted exceedingly, for the sympathy of one of her own sex was what her heart had sorely yearned for and been denied.

"I take it for granted, my darling Evy," continued the widow, "that all that old gentleman has told me is true; that he has in no way exaggerated the calamity that has befallen you, but that your uncle's affairs are in as bad a state as they well can be."

"I am afraid they are," answered Evy, sighing. "What has happened to us is I believe no less than utter ruin."

"Still, I should like to be quite sure, dear, before making the proposition I have in my mind. In my country, some people are said to be ruined when they haven't a cent, and others when they have saved fifty thousand dollars out of the fire."

"My uncle has saved nothing, he tells me; what he may get from the furniture of the cottage"—and Evy could not help casting a forlorn glance around the pretty little drawing-room, almost every object in which had come from Dunwich, and re-

minded her of that happy home—" is absolutely all that he will have to look to."

" It ought to sell well," was the widow's rather unexpected reply. " That's a duck of a piano; and the carpet is a three pile one—Kidderminster, don't you call it? It's a pity the sale can't take place at New York, instead of Balcombe."

Mrs. Storks was always abrupt in manner; but on the present occasion she turned out her sentences like wood from a chopping machine. A stranger would under the circumstances have pronounced her rude and unfeeling, but one who knew her well would have perceived that she was only nervous and embarrassed.

" I am afraid that all these pretty things together won't realize very much," observed she, after a little pause.

" I am afraid not," returned Evy, quietly. " But it is no use repining at what can't be helped."

"Just so; and besides, we must remember, Evy, that pecuniary loss is not, after all, the greatest misfortune that can befall us."

"I have reason to know that," answered the girl, slowly; it was the first bitter speech that her sorrows had wrung from her, but she could not refrain from uttering it. There is nothing so provoking to a wounded spirit as the platitudes which others would fain apply to heal it.

"Oh, I didn't mean that, Evy," cried Mrs. Storks, reproachfully; "how could you have supposed I did? I was thinking of myself when I spoke of greater losses than that of money—oh, I don't allude to the general, my dear"—for Evy had looked up at once with a sympathizing glance—"though I was very sorry to part with him; time has healed that, as it heals everything, except the eyes."

"Except the eyes?" ejaculated the wondering Evy; "why the eyes?"

"Because the older we grow the weaker they get—you don't know, probably, my dear, how very weak and bad my eyes are getting."

"Indeed, I did not," said Evy, regarding the bright orbs of the widow with compassionate curiosity. "I should never have thought that yours were failing."

"But they are, my dear; they're failing fast. My doctor tells me, I mustn't use them a bit more than I can help; mustn't write nor read, but must look about to engage at once some sort of amanuensis and companion. Don't think me selfish, my dear girl, but directly I heard of the change in your circumstances, my first idea was, 'Why, perhaps Evy Carthew will be persuaded to come and fill this very place, and how nice it would be if she would.'"

Evy looked up with a grave smile, and took the widow's hand in hers.

"No, dear friend," said she. "I do not

think you selfish—certainly not that—nor, to be frank—in any danger of going blind. You would establish a sinecure in your household with the generous intention of inviting me to fill it."

"No, no, no," insisted the widow, eagerly, though flushing at the discovery of her pious fraud, "it would not be a sinecure, I do assure you, although I may have made my eyes out to be a little less serviceable than they really are. The fact is I do want a companion; some nice lady-like young person—yes, that's the phrase, 'lady-like young person'—such as Evy Carthew, to make me feel less lonely and wake me up a bit. I've got a little house of my own which would be very pleasant to me if I could persuade you to share it, whereas, as it is, I spend half the year in hotels, and such like, to avoid being bored to death by my own society. I should set you lots of things to do, I promise you; to put out

the flowers, for instance, for I love flowers in my rooms, and servants have never any notion of arranging them, and to make the tea of a morning when I happen to be a little late; and—and——"

"And as many more onerous, humiliating tasks as your imagination can suggest," interrupted Evy, with a smile more bright than she could have believed her lips could ever again have formed. This unexpected kindness and consideration fell on her heart as rain on the parched grass, which before seems dead. "No, my dear Mrs. Storks," answered she, gravely; "it is impossible for me to accept your generous offer. I appreciate it, believe me, to the full, and shall never, never forget it; but I cannot leave my uncle. For all that has made my life hitherto a happy one, I have to thank him alone, and in the future I intend to do my best to render his misfortunes tolerable."

"I was afraid you would say that," said the widow, heaving a deep sigh. "I really don't see how I could get on with poor Mr. Hulet; I mean, that is, for a constancy; he does take such a deal of medicine."

Mrs. Storks looked so perplexed at this consideration that Evy could not repress a smile. "Indeed," said she, "since all these misfortunes have happened to us, I do believe that my dear uncle has never once sought relief in drugs or restoratives. He has locked them all away in a cupboard as though the very sight of them were hateful to him. But still it is very certain that *he* cannot come to reside with you, dear friend, either as amanuensis or companion."

"You bear yourself like a true heroine, my darling," answered the other, admiringly. "I always said that you had as much of real courage as that crocodile Judith has of impudence. How is she, by-the-by, Evy?"

As she put the question, the widow's tone changed suddenly to one of carelessness and contempt, but there was something of interest too in her listening face, as she waited for the reply.

"Judith is much as usual," answered Evy, evasively.

"Ah, not inconsolably depressed, I dare say. That young woman's capabilities of enduring the misfortunes that happen to other people are doubtless very considerable. She has been enriched, I hear, by Mrs. Hulet's death; is that the case?"

"I believe so," said Evy, quietly.

"But she has not offered to help your uncle out of his difficulties, I conclude, and I am equally sure that he will never ask her to do so?"

Evy bowed her head. She could not trust herself to say how utterly out of the question was either supposition.

"Well, well, my darling, such being the

position of affairs, and my little offer of assistance having proved of no avail, there is nothing for me but to hand you this epistle ;" she took from her pocket a sealed envelope, directed to Mr. Hulet, and held it out for her companion to take. " This concerns yourself, Evy, quite as much as your uncle, and comes from an honest and genuine friend of both."

But Evy drew back her hand ; the idea that Mr. De Coucy had made the widow the bearer of his benevolence in the shape of some pecuniary aid suddenly occurred to her, and called the colour into her pale cheeks.

" It isn't—it isn't money, Mrs. Storks, I hope."

" No, my darling, it is not money. The person who sends it is as well aware as myself that we have to do with a very proud and independent young lady, by whom nothing so reasonable as the offer of

a banker's cheque would be tolerated for an instant. If you had been a more sensible girl we should have had no difficulty in the matter. As it is, my plan has failed, and according to promise, I therefore bring Mrs. Hodlin Barmby's under your consideration."

"Has good Mrs. Barmby, then, been thinking, like yourself, of how she can be of use to us?" cried Evy, letting fall a grateful tear or two; "if our misfortune was less, we might almost welcome it, since it shows us such noble friends."

"Thinking of you! of course she has been thinking of you, and talking of you too, like every one else in Balcombe." The smile faded out of Evy's face, at those careless words. If every one was talking of them, what must some of those who were not their friends have said about her uncle, and Mrs. Hulet's death. The widow perceived her change of colour, though she

could not guess its cause; and added hastily: "But I must not detain you longer, Evy, since I am sure you must have enough to do and think about. Mrs. Barmby would herself have come, you may be sure, if it had not been for that consideration. She is a good, sensible woman, such as one feels one could get on with if it were necessary to live with her for ever under the same roof—a conviction which is the great test of one's liking for a fellow-creature. As for living with Judith, for example, I, for my part, couldn't have done it. You have the patience of an angel, Evy, but for my part I should have pitched her over the cliff—oh, dear, dear, what am I saying? Forgive me, my darling, I quite forgot. Well, you'll show that letter to Mr. Hulet, at once, and when you have both made up your minds as to the answer, you will let her know. Remember me most kindly to your uncle, will you? and give my most

earnest wishes to Judith, that—yes—that she may be as happy as she deserves."

For an instant the widow's handsome face lit up with a roguish smile, then melted into eager tenderness as she clasped Evy in her arms and bade her farewell.

Her mission had missed its object, but it had not been useless, since it had left the sense of kindliness, consideration, sympathy—of all in short that is best in friendship—behind it. For it is not the making use of friends that renders them a comfort to the unfortunate, but the knowledge that they possess them to make use of if they please.

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